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### Community power: problems, possibilities and potentials, as perceived by stakeholders in Acton, West London

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**Community power:  
problems, possibilities and potentials,  
as perceived by stakeholders in Acton,  
West London.**

**Rachel Elizabeth Pepper**

**PhD**

**Thesis submitted for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy**

**Goldsmiths College  
University of London**

**8<sup>th</sup> November 2010**

## **Declaration of originality**

I, Rachel Pepper, declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in any form for another degree or diploma at any university or other institute of tertiary education. Information derived from the published and unpublished work of others has been acknowledged in the text and a list of references is given in the bibliography.

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Rachel Pepper

8<sup>th</sup> November 2010

## **Abstract**

This research examines participants' perspectives on opportunities, barriers and new spaces for community power. It explores original evidence on how they perceive the conditions that enable or inhibit community empowerment to occur, and the factors that influence this process. The investigation references different schools of thought concerning power in relation to local actors' perceptions. I focus upon the theories of Foucault, Freire and Taylor in particular, exploring perspectives of power as fluid, dynamic and pervasive. These approaches provide the framework for the exploration of the relevance of theory to practice.

These debates have relevance to current public policies especially that promoting citizen engagement as part of public service modernisation and civic renewal. The research examines the inherent tensions between policy aims and practical experiences. Theoretical and policy questions are explored through a case study based in Ealing, West London, looking at local issues for a range of experienced activists in the global city. The research timeframe covers five years and includes the use of participatory research methods. The focus is on actors' understanding, how motivations impact on the strategies employed across the sectors, and the ways those 'inside' and 'outside' the system adjust to changes. An analysis of participants' testimonies reveals the contemporary peopled cityscape, and the routes to gaining greater control over the personal, community and political worlds. My thesis points to a shifting terrain within which community professionals and activists navigate, and reveals evidence of considerably more common ground between public policy professionals and community activists than has previously been suggested in the existing literature and current policy frameworks. The ability to adapt to changes in context is exposed as critical, whilst balancing core principles with new priorities. The strategic role of bridging individuals and organisations is identified as an important function providing a crucial and challenging link.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

**Situating the research**

**Thesis structure**

## **Situating the research**

My interest in this research topic stems from my concern that current urban experiences of marginalisation, alienation and discrimination have resulted from a fractured, disparate and unequal society. The effects of this on individuals and communities are profound as the marginalised can become increasingly disempowered, isolated and disconnected. It is from this starting point that I have come to focus upon the role of community activists in addressing this imbalance. In my experience the role of these activists has emerged as a potentially significant factor in developing paths toward community empowerment and egalitarianism. The concentration on the notion of power, empowerment strategies and the context of local governance and participation influenced the evolution of my thinking as the research question and approach developed. My fascination with the passion of community activists in their numerous guises - particularly those activists who remain engaged and committed over time - is at the centre of this study, and has guided the lines of enquiry in the pursuit of potential routes to a more equitable society.

Having explored different theoretical approaches to power and empowerment to provide the theoretical framework for this research, I decided to draw upon both structural and more Foucauldian approaches. I will explain the exploration of theory more fully later (in chapter 2), where important authors and concepts are studied in relation to the theorisation of the subject and their usefulness to the emerging issues.

Community empowerment policies in the U.K. have been couched within 'top-down' frameworks including the drive towards democratic renewal, structural changes concerning governance and the devolution of power. On the other hand, 'bottom up' grassroots organisation concerning equalities issues, service improvement and cultural assertion is also taking place. The policy context over the past thirteen years has provided new opportunities / 'invited spaces' which offer both potential and challenges for those concerned with empowerment from the bottom up. However, the political exclusion experienced by marginalised

communities threatens both democratic renewal and community empowerment. Different ways of understanding power and empowerment, inclusion and exclusion, influence experiences of participation in civil society. Drawing on differing notions of power, citizenship and democracy this research explores ways of bridging this gap between the relatively powerful and powerless.

My subject area is the people and places of Acton, within the London Borough of Ealing, U.K., where issues relating to perceptions and experiences of empowerment, place and voice within urban spaces are evident. Whilst seeking balance, I recognise the compromising implications of my close proximity to the subject and participants. However I have acknowledged and addressed the challenges this has exposed through my practice and the use of transparency, countered by the rich reportage this location has afforded. All this has been taking place within an area of the city that clearly illustrates local, national and global dimensions, and so I have drawn upon Gaventa's three dimensional power cube to try and make sense of these complex dynamics. My research attempts to capture the different takes on the city by involving a broad spectrum of actors from different sectors with diverse conceptions and practical knowledge of power within their domain, policy context and sphere of influence. The breadth of experience exposed through the empirical dataset explores how stakeholders understand power and respond to the community empowerment opportunities that have been introduced in recent years. These key actors have been actively involved for many years in varying capacities, which is of particular interest due to the potential this has to reveal patterns and change over time.

The study focuses on community activists' working within and outside traditional sites of power who are redefining the rules of engagement and action, in parallel with the changing policy context over the past decade or more. To enrich the debate the selected community actors not only represent a wide spectrum, but have stayed the course and consequently offer a wealth of experience. Across the research sample, is power understood as an energy flow or a possession? Is power described as dynamic and evolving through time and with experience? Is power in flux and available to be harnessed? The research raises questions in

relation to a number of assumptions that there are significant differences between the perceptions of statutory and non-statutory actors and highlights the role of bridging individuals with experience that straddle both sectors. Insider and outsider positions will also be explored and how these can be adapted to effect empowerment.

The relationship between the local and global will be considered in terms of experiences of power dynamics, and the ways that people adapt to changing environments and new challenges. The research question has been investigated through testing people's perceptions of power against real life events. The reading and experience of London as a global city with international, national and local interrelationships is an undercurrent of this research. Globalisation is evident in the lives of the research sample and in the nature of their work. These global influences will be explored in relation to community empowerment at the local level.

There is a vast amount of literature on community and power. I am bringing the two areas together. Although there are theories on community empowerment, I am keen to build on this and respond to Taylor's (2003: p. 158) call for further research to identify what supports effective community change initiatives and transformation.

"But if participatory democracy is not to evolve into survival of the fittest, much more attention needs to be given to the ways in which it is legitimated, how diverse views are balanced, how change is institutionalised, and how it is accountable." (2003: p. 230)

This thesis goes on to reveal testimonies that contribute further insights to the discourse of power and exclusion.

## **Thesis structure**

The thesis begins by introducing the research question, situation and significance in Chapter 1. Chapter 2 reviews the literature relevant to the themes and concerns of the study. This second chapter covers writings dealing with power, empowerment and influencing change.

Chapter 3 considers the importance of place, globalisation and the literature tackling community, democracy and the policy context. Here, the key ideas emerging from the literature are brought together and summarised in the literary foundations section, providing the basis for the research questions that will be addressed through the investigation.

Chapter 4 sets out the research strategy, overall, as well as explaining the selection criteria rationale, the methodological choices involved, and the researcher's approach to the analysis and interpretation of the data. Perspectives on power dynamics in research and the potential of research as an empowering tool are also included, together with some consideration of the ethics involved. Here, I reflect on my location vis-a-vis the researched.

Chapter 5 looks at the local context of the study, setting the scene by outlining geographical, community, political and sectoral background information and opportunity relevant to West London.

The analysis of the research findings is divided into several thematic chapters that address the research concerns. The first, Chapter 6, introduces the research participants and their personal and positional characteristics.

Chapter 7 focuses on analysing conceptions and experiences of power and personal growth. This is where actors' perceptions of power are analysed, connected with theoretical positions and related to their lived experiences.

Chapter 8 examines respondents' experiences and understanding of influence, and whether the theories that consider this are relevant to West London's given and taken spaces. The importance of individual and organisational bridging roles will be argued here.

Empowerment possibilities are examined in Chapter 9 by investigating the role of capacity building and commitment. This chapter explores activists' personal and institutional empowerment strategies, looking at their potential for tackling disadvantage.

The shift from government to governance is related to participants' experiences of exclusion, structural inequality, participation and transformation. As new opportunities emerge, new challenges also arise. Chapter 10 investigates the problems of addressing barriers to empowerment, how these tensions are balanced and the consequences of the political context on experience.

Chapter 11 appraises views concerned with community, place and globalisation. The multiple urban realities of the human and spatial geography of West London, the local and the global links, and conceptions of community are examined. Participants are identified as both global citizens and urban actors. Opportunities sit alongside constraints in the global city and are located where the interplay of international, national and local forces impact.

Change is analysed in Chapter 12 through an examination of shifts in perspectives of power and exploring adjustments to subjects' opinions over time. The relationship between perception and practice is stressed, and theoretical models applied to these experiences.

Chapter 13 looks at governance, devolution and the policy context, and whether these affect political engagement and participation. Evidence and illustrations of shifts in power through citizen involvement in politics are sought. Here also, challenges are highlighted and the need to balance the evident tensions is emphasised.

In conclusion (Chapter 14) I consider the key findings and reflect on the research process. The central questions and answers that have emerged through the findings are revisited and my thesis concerning empowerment expressed.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Power and empowerment in the context of globalisation**

#### **The Literature: an introduction**

#### **Power**

##### **Structural-conflict analyses**

##### **Fluid Power**

#### **Empowerment**

##### **Key concepts**

##### **The role of community development**

##### **New opportunities and spaces**

#### **Influencing change**

##### **Influence**

##### **Inside/out**

##### **Outside/in**

##### **Inside and outside**



## **The Literature: an introduction**

The next two chapters critically examine the literature landscape and set the scene for my own research journey. They also serve as a foundation on which to build my thesis. The literature based on the themes drawn upon in this study is extensive and influential in both the field and more broadly in society at large, influencing the thinking and ways of conceptualising the world in which we live. The metaphor of a changing landscape when describing the scenery provided by the literature, establishes the lay of the land with its key markers, acknowledges its continual development and fits with the socio-urban landscape explored through this study. This notion is tackled by Michael Schratz and Rob Walker in an experiential manner, describing the literature review process as a navigational exercise, getting to know the terrain, recognising the signs, and positioning literatures in the background or foreground, indicative of one's own placement in the academic landscape.

“Locating themselves in respect to its key ideas is not like finding their way through a library catalogue so much as establishing an identity through a songline. The alignments that biography creates, the totems and taboos, are social more than they are functional. To ‘review the literature’ is a statement of who you are and how you relate to others who share your culture and so, like all else in research, it turns out to be less about methods and techniques and more about identity and relationships.” (1995: p. 103)

The chapter addresses the central themes of power, empowerment and influence. This starting point enables an examination of influential analyses and their potential significance to this area of research and my thesis. The opening section reviewing relevant literature introduces thinkers who have differing yet relevant perspectives on power. Structural-conflict analyses are examined as well as those that identify power as fluid. I consider which concepts are useful to social actors as they struggle with the new spaces that emerge, where the presence of structural inequalities evidently sits alongside power experienced as fluid and transformative.

The following section on empowerment literature looks at concepts including the role of community development and new empowerment opportunities and spaces. The implications of different dimensions of power on empowerment are considered including 'learning the rules of the game', putting issues onto formal agendas or challenging existing agendas in transformative ways.

Influencing change will be considered in the final section. John Gaventa's 'power cube' and Andrea Cornwall's closed, invited and claimed spaces will be examined as government policies have opened up 'invited spaces' and as there are examples of 'claimed spaces'<sup>1</sup>. This leads into Marilyn Taylor's discussion of community development and the capacity for working both sides of the equation, from the inside via 'invited spaces' **and** from the outside via social movements.

Seeking theories that underpin and inform this research whilst drawing on aspects from different models, I have also identified gaps in the theory. The academic approaches that I have examined have little to say to explain the complex and multi-dimensional manifestations of power and empowerment. There remains a need to make sense of this more nuanced appreciation and experience of power. I consider the usefulness of different theoretical models to this research and those researched. I look for evidence that relates to different models and their value in analysing current trends and actors' conceptions of power. The chapter reviews key texts concerning power, empowerment and transformation paths, establishing the theoretical research foundation of this study and setting the scene for the development of my thesis.

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<sup>1</sup> These processes will be explored more fully later in the section on public policies.

## **Power**

Central to this research are conceptions and analyses of power. Theorists concerned with power can be grouped into two categories. Firstly, there are those who take a structural conflict approach, such as Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci and Steven Lukes. This position contrasts with those such as Michel Foucault and Marilyn Taylor who view power to some extent in more fluid terms, seeing it everywhere and as something that everyone can aspire to and grasp by deciding to participate, learning the rules of engagement and becoming empowered. I look at the structural conflict analysis suggesting that this has relevance, and also examine those seeing power in more fluid terms, arguing which is more relevant to a critical understanding of actors' perceptions of power in the present complex context.

### Structural-conflict analyses

The degree to which structural conflict approaches to power have significance will be viewed through an examination of scholars who have developed this notion. Definitions of power vary, from the Marxist perspective that binds economic and political power, with economic power at the centre; to Max Weber's (1946: p. 180) focus on the ability of individuals or groups to realise their will, achieved either by the threat or use of force, or by conformity where the legitimacy of the powerful is accepted by the powerless; and Gramsci's (1971: pp. 279-318) use of hegemony to explain the legitimisation of power under capitalism. This association of power and control focuses on the validation of power through reinforcing social divisions and attitudes.

Lukes' (1986: p.5) perspective is that 'to have power is to be able to make a difference to the world,' describing the differences between the locus of power and outcomes of power. Lukes' distinguishes between three different perspectives on power, firstly a one-dimensional view of power that presupposes a liberal conception of interests (the view of the pluralists). Here the focus is on decision-

making behaviour where there is an observable conflict of interests expressed in policy preferences and revealed by political participation. This dimension of power is associated with the work of Robert Dahl, pluralism and studies of observable behaviour. Secondly, a two-dimensional view reflects a reformist stance (held by critics of the pluralist perspective, Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz) which considers the way decisions are prevented from being taken on potential issues over which there is a conflict of interests, seen in policy preferences and sub-political grievances. Here, underlying forces prevent controversial issues becoming conflicts. Thirdly, a three-dimensional ideological and radical view of power enables a deeper analysis of power relations. This political analysis scrutinises the hidden forces that constrain the agenda.

“Is it not the supreme and most insidious exercise of power to prevent people, to whatever degree, from having grievances by shaping their perceptions, cognitions and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things, either because they see it as natural and unchangeable, or because they value it as divinely ordained and beneficial?” (2005: p. 28)

This view critiques the behavioural focus of the first two views as too limited, and highlights the ways institutional and social forces keep issues out of politics, legitimising the interests of the powerful.

Lukes identifies two types of power, the capacity to impact on the world and the capacity to dominate others. Central to his analysis of power is a commitment to the principle of responsible individualism. He recognises the opposition between people's interests and their ideological blindness. For Lukes, power is all about politics, the politics of the everyday. He also identifies the power to set the agenda, the power to shape desires and the ideological mechanisms of domination and resistance. This study explores how people experience, interpret and engage with power and it questions whether Lukes' notions of structure and agency apply.

Gramsci understands power as a relationship, spread throughout civil society and the state, describing it as 'hegemony armoured by coercion', embodied in coercive state apparatus. Gramsci views ideological power as important, seeing that where

there is power, there are also competing interests and resistance. Central to this is the 'war of position' whereby alliances are built on a dynamic, shifting terrain. Hall describes Gramsci's work in the following terms:

"...the manner in which his notion of 'hegemony' forces us to reconceptualise the nature of class and social forces: indeed, he makes us rethink the very notion of power itself – the project and its complex 'conditions of existence' in modern societies. The work on the 'national-popular', on ideology, on the moral, cultural and intellectual dimensions of power, on its double articulation in state and in civil society, on the inter-play between authority, leadership, domination and the 'education of consent' equipped us with an enlarged conception of power, and its molecular operations, its investment on many different sites. His pluri-centred conception of power made obsolete the narrow one-dimensional conceptions on which most of us had operated." (1982: p. 9)

In Gramsci's theory of hegemony there is an emphasis on the ubiquitous and diffuse nature of power supported by beliefs and practices. He identifies the presence of power in all social relations.

Pierre Bourdieu tackles the complex relationship between power and culture, identifying the cultural reproduction of power that embeds and reinforces class-based power and privilege. He highlights the reproduction of social and cultural power in individuals and groups that sustain established powers and norms<sup>2</sup>. Bourdieu examines relations between social structures, systems of classification and language. For him, whatever our functionally defined roles in society may be, we are continually negotiating questions of authority and the control of definitions of reality. Bourdieu moves beyond Marxist theory and economic and material considerations, conceptualising capital not only in the economic sense, but also in terms of social, cultural and symbolic capital. He highlights the importance of the symbolic dimensions of power relations, whereby domination is no longer based on coercion, instead domination is achieved through symbolic manipulation that serves a political purpose. The role of cultural capital is significant where social

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<sup>2</sup> "...structures tend to reproduce themselves by producing agents invested with the system of dispositions which is able to engender practices adapted to these structures and thus contribute to their reproduction." (Bourdieu, 1973: p.7)

knowledge, experience and connections differentiate between those who are familiar with the valued institutionalised cultural forms, and those who are not. Social capital is also relevant to this study in the support and influence it has over resources based on relationships, group membership and networks. These forms of capital can be used to explain the complex relationships between concepts and practices.

Bourdieu's perspective differs from the determinism of classical structuralism in that fields (networks of historically rooted relations) can be modified, interact and are dynamic.

“...symbolic struggles that take place in different fields, and where what is at stake is the very representation of the social world, and in particular the hierarchy within each of the fields and between the different fields.” (1998: p. 229)

For Bourdieu the field of power is the principal field which relates both to the dominant social class, and also operates as an organising principle of differentiation across all fields. Fields are organised around types or combinations of capital and their shape is determined by habitus – the mental system of structures, an internal embodiment of external structures through which we think, act and create social structures. The habitus is a collective phenomenon that constrains but doesn't determine thought and action, which structures and is structured by the social world, and which operates both ways. The degree to which people are indeed restricted by internal and external forces and the dynamism of the relationships between the two will be explored subsequently.

Nick Crossley takes Bourdieu's conception of habitus forward in his analysis of the public sphere and social movements. He examines the relationship of habitus to political debate, and in particular the significance of 'communicative encounters' (2004: p. 105).

“When individuals meet to talk they bring their social position (class, gender, race, generation etc) with them. Indeed, their social position constitutes, via the habitus, the schemas of transmission and reception generative of the communicative process. In this respect communication is always

systemically distorted since the possibility of undistorted communication, if that means communication not structured through socially shaped habitus, is nil. But there are degrees of systemic distortion relative to the distance in social space of interlocutors and the inclusion/exclusion of all affected parties or their representatives. As such the critique of distortion is meaningful and necessary.” (2004: p. 108)

The ways in which actors operate and communicate across social divides is of interest, particularly in terms of access and control.

Crossley (2003: pp. 43-68) considers transformation by bringing the theory of radical habitus together with practice in the social movement field. He suggests Bourdieu's conceptualisation of habitus is a strong foundation on which to analyse social action and protest. He notes that it is the educated middle classes who are better resourced and more likely to engage in environmental protest for instance, than the working class. Habitus is related to communication, contestation and political debate, then, and is something to consider during this research.

### Fluid power

An alternative model of power is that proposed by Foucault who sees power articulated through the organisation of identity, operating through culture and life-style. It works through discourses, practices and institutions that frame and govern the boundaries of possibility and action. Power is woven into the fabric of society, impacting on the way we perceive and experience social relations. “Power in the substantive sense, “le” pouvoir, doesn't exist....power means....a more or less organised, hierarchical, co-ordinated cluster of relations.” (Foucault, 1980: p. 198), whereby people both experience **and** use power. Power is interpreted as something that flows and circulates, realised through a net-like organisation. For Foucault, power is present and spread over all relationships, with particular reference to the link between knowledge and power. From this perspective an understanding of the way in which the rules of engagement are established and

agendas are set is better understood from the starting point of the internalisation of ideology, values and the way we perceive the world. (Lukes 1974; Foucault 1997).

Foucault offers definitions of power that differ from the more traditional liberal and Marxist theories of power. For him power is relational rather than a thing, it is not only repressive but productive, and it is strategic. However power is not restricted to government and the state, as it is exercised throughout the social body. For Foucault power is omnipresent, operating at the micro levels of social relations. In an interview about his writing on 'Body/Power' his response to questions concerning his focus on micro-powers exercised in daily life clarifies his view.

"I don't claim at all that the State apparatus is unimportant, but ... one of the first things that has to be understood is that power isn't localised in the State apparatus and that nothing in society will be changed if the mechanisms of power that function outside, below and alongside the State apparatuses, on a much more minute and everyday level, are not also changed." (1975 interview)

Power is seen as fluid by Foucault then, describing it as being spread throughout society, and having the potential for exertion by both the powerful and the relatively powerless. Foucault treats power as a 'closely linked grid of disciplinary coercions' that subjugate people mentally and physically. People therefore experience being subjects to others by 'control and dependence' whilst attached to their 'own identity by consciousness and self-knowledge'. Under this psycho-social interpretation, people are free **and** not free at the same time, encountering the micro **and** macro experience of power.

If one accepts that power is all pervasive, and that we are all vehicles of power, then the understanding of society as dichotomously divided into the powerful and the powerless is disrupted. According to Uma Kothari, "Power is thus found in the creation of norms and social and cultural practices at all levels." (2001: p. 141). This position acknowledges the complexity of power dynamics that extend and transform the global and local political arenas. The view that the disempowered can influence ways of thinking, operating, challenging and creating change within



policy and power constraints is articulated by Patsy Healey. "...we 'have power' and, if sufficiently aware of the structuring constraints bearing in on us, can work to make changes by changing the rules, changing the flow of resources and, most significantly, changing the way we think about things." (1997: p. 49). This take on power clearly has implications for the relatively powerless, as it is imbued with a sense of optimism and opportunity. Power here is not rigid, but accessible to those who have the potential to exploit cracks in the system, gaining power and influence.

Authors such as Freire describe a model of power that falls somewhere set between an economistic Marxist model of power and Foucault's view of power being all pervasive. Instead, these accounts see power as having transformative properties. Freire (1970: p.47) builds on Gramsci's interpretation of power, seeing it as something which is created by people when they transform their world through collective action, reflecting communities of interests' social struggles. Developing a questioning and critical attitude not only relates to education, but to life in general. This reveals an attitude to the world that begins with curiosity and progresses to seeking answers, confronting and challenging. The politics of liberation is about thinking, doing and altering power relationships. Freire focuses on consciousness, critical awareness and the ability to transform circumstances and situations.

"The ability to reflect, to evaluate, to program, to investigate, and to transform is unique to human beings in the world and with the world. Life becomes existence and life support becomes world when the conscience about the world, which also implies the conscience about the self, emerges and establishes a dialectical relationship with the world." (Freire, 2004: p.35)

Taylor also understands power as fluid, dynamic and present in every aspect of our lives, where there are opportunities for intervention and assertion. Her policy focus allows for an examination of the application of concepts of power to be analysed in relation to context. Here there is a shift away from a fixed idea of power rooted in government and state institutions, to a more fluid analysis of power that is shared and negotiated in a governance model. Power from the perspective of participation and partnership has the potential to open up new political and public spaces.

“A more positive analysis would reject this zero-sum and adversarial view of power, seeing power as an energy that flows rather than being possessed. It would argue that, while power is woven into our taken-for-granted assumptions about how things work and what is possible, it is nonetheless dynamic rather than static and that our ‘ways of seeing’ are constantly recreated and reproduced through our day-to-day activities and interactions. In this view, individuals are not necessarily the pawns of capital, but are capable of redefining the rules of the game. Such an analysis would highlight the diversity of interests within government and see policy making as a complex and contradictory process, with fault lines to be exploited and alliances to be made.” (2003: p.86)

The notion of power as negotiable and shared through the creation of opportunities to engage and effect change is of particular interest, and central to the research, acknowledging however, that structure is also relevant.

Marjorie Mayo and Marilyn Taylor (2001: p.40) have both stressed the significance of the relativity of power, and the consequences of this on both formal and informal arenas. The question of relative power and the effects this has on different actors has implications on the results and realities of contested areas. Structural constraints impact on the experience and relativity of power. The playing field is far from even, and until this is addressed, the meeting of unequal partners can only lead to imbalanced results. The barriers to empowerment, as well as the routes to power need to be examined and tackled in order to understand power dynamics and the potential for change.

In summary, the theoretical analyses and differing perspectives of power examined here range from those that see power concerned with structure and agency (Lukes), evident in hegemony and coercion (Gramsci), dynamic and reinforced through cultural reproduction (Bourdieu), and played out through political debate and communication (Crossley). Both Marx and Foucault have relevance as there **are** structural inequalities in terms of economic, political, social and cultural capital, but power is **also** more complex and there is scope for change and flexibility.

The theoretical analyses of power considered in this section will be reviewed in relation to actors' perceptions of power in West London. The implication of debates concerned with power and the extent to which people can become empowered under current structural and psychological constraints are applicable to this study. How do the research participants perceive this and how does this affect the strategies they employ? I explore what underlying differences impact on the scope and extent of empowerment, investigate traditional and non-traditional routes to power, and identify whether there are significant differences across sectors.

## Empowerment

Whilst an appreciation of power is central to this thesis, the role and nature of empowerment is equally important to understanding how different people perceive and make use of empowerment strategies. This section will look at different ways that empowerment is analysed, proceeds to examine theory that identifies the potentially empowering role of community development, and finally considers studies that address empowerment opportunities and spaces.

The antithesis of power is empowerment, although this notion could be taken to carry with it the contentious implication that those without power have to accept being **given** power by those who already have it. It has also been argued however that people can, and do, empower themselves, through critical awareness and social movement activity for instance. It may be useful to break down the analysis of the literature concerning empowerment into the stages of the empowerment journey beginning with an overview of key concepts such as structure and agency, moving on to engage with personal empowerment, then looking at the pluralist view of 'given spaces', the outsider view and the role of social movements ('taken spaces'), and finally the significance of bridging organisations and community development, and the new spaces and opportunities for empowerment. How closely does the literature link attaining empowerment to tackling the causes of disempowerment and connecting the ways relations of power influence opportunities and choices.

Taylor (1995: p.86) describes empowerment as something achieved through participation and involvement, reached through a variety of routes, recognising the emergence of political leadership in community-based organisations as a significant opportunity for engagement with the political process. The practical assertions of power reached through political learning at the micro level amongst local communities have the potential to impact on the macro level in response to specific conflicts of interest, challenging the top-down empowerment model. (Richard Werbner 1999: p.57)

However, others (Nicholas Hildyard et al, 2001: p.37) argue against the rhetoric of empowerment, concerned that the process of 'uncritical empowerment' (lacking awareness) can effectively subordinate and negatively impact on the lives of those involved. The enactment of participatory approaches that simplify people's realities does not take on board the impact of preconceptions and existing relationships. This highlights the 'power to' versus 'power over' debate, and flags up the distinction between 'self-seeded' activism and the imposition of top-down policy intervention.

"They cannot 'give' empowerment to their 'beneficiaries', 'targets of development' or 'clients': to be 'participants', people have to be able to use their 'power to' negotiate and transform those hopefully willing partners who have institutional and structural 'power over'." (2001: p.70)

Here, different perspectives on empowerment will be unpacked.

### Key concepts

There are a number of different ways that empowerment has been described in the literature<sup>3</sup>. Empowerment can be understood through Luke's dimensions of power referenced earlier, as gaining the power to set the agenda and the power to shape desires. It can be defined in terms of learning the 'rules of the game', putting issues onto formal agendas, or more broadly to include the capacity to confront these, challenging official agendas in transformative ways and developing alternatives. Some approaches have a rather pessimistic take on empowerment, stressing the limitations of empowerment within the current economic and political context and constraints (Angus Stewart<sup>4</sup>, 2001: p.175). Alternatively, there are other perspectives that are more optimistic. This approach describes the aspiration to empower the disempowered, addressing the changes needed to the political and economic structures to enable this process.

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<sup>3</sup> Several definitions of empowerment exist, the one most relevant to those being referenced is the one made simply by McArdle (1989) as: 'the process whereby decisions are made by the people who have to wear the consequences of those decisions.....the only thing required for empowerment to occur is participation in decision-making.'" (Onyx and Benton 1995: p.50).

<sup>4</sup> Referencing Jürgen Habermas's position expressed in his book entitled *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* (1996).

Different types of power relations and dimensions of power have implications for empowerment. This can be broken down in such a way as to turn the experience of power over, to, with and within, into transformation opportunities (Luttrell et al, 2007: p.3). Achieving different degrees of empowerment illustrates the way control over opportunities for greater power is linked to the roots of disempowerment. The difference between structure (social structures such as class or ethnicity) and agency (action by individuals or collectives) is highlighted, demonstrated below by comparing empowerment objectives from an agency and structure perspective.

<b>Type of power relation</b>	<b>An 'agency' approach to empowerment</b>	<b>Transforming 'structures' for empowerment</b>
<b>Power Over:</b> the ability to coerce and influence the actions and thoughts of the powerless	Changes in power relations within households and communities and at the macro level, e.g. increased role in decision making and bargaining power	Respect equal rights of others, challenge to inequality and unfair privileges
<b>Power To:</b> the capacity to act, to organise and change existing hierarchies	Increased skills, access and control over income and resources, and access to markets and networks	Increased skills and resources to challenge injustice and inequality faced by <i>others</i>
<b>Power With:</b> increased power from collective action, social mobilisation and alliance building	Organisation of the less powerful to enhance abilities to change power relations Increased participation of the less powerful	Supportive organisation of those with power to challenge injustice, inequality, discrimination and stigma

<b>Power from Within:</b> increased individual consciousness, self- dignity and awareness	Increased confidence and awareness of choices and rights; widened aspirations and ability to transform aspiration into action	Changes in attitudes and stereotypes; commitment to change
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Comparing objectives from an agency and a structural perspective of empowerment (Mayoux, 2003: p.16).

Power from within can be seen in the work of Chris Warren who believes that people need to be empowered as individuals before they can be politically empowered. The personal and political are linked in Warren's analysis, and he identifies four stages of the empowerment journey.

“...engagement and individual support; support / care from peer group and critical reflection within peer group; taking action; citizenship through participation.” (1997: p.115)

Margaret Ledwith examines strategies of transformation in her work in similar ways. She identifies the role of community development nurturing personal empowerment, potentially leading to collective action for change and striving for social justice.

“...Empowerment is a collective concept; it relates to relations of power and oppression in society and is part of a transformative strategy for social justice and democracy. Its analysis lies at the individual, institutional, structural and global levels at which oppression, discrimination and exploitation impact according to class, gender, age, disability, ethnicity and sexual preference – an inherently political project.” (1997: p.148)

The spaces in which personal problems are translated into public issues, are found in the arena where members of local communities can articulate their experiences. As windows of opportunity are identified, support mobilised, existing debates reframed and agendas set, excluded communities have the potential to address issues and generate change. When the public arena becomes the decision-

making arena, change can be initiated. Taylor highlights the support needed to build social capital and community empowerment, however.

“If policy is to build social capital, and draw on the strengths of community, mutuality and civil society to tackle social exclusion, it needs a tough, rigorous and realistic understanding of how these concepts operate in the real world and the contexts in which they can flourish” (2003: p.217)

The link between the individual / community and structural issues is evident in the way Hill takes the experience of power into the domain of the city, its citizens and decision-making processes. “Citizenship is about power and its distribution, about the framework of public and thus collective decisions, and accountability for those decisions.” (1994: p.4). Political participation is central to empowerment; however Hill recognises that some are excluded from this process, and that there are also limitations of decisive action at the local level. These structural inequalities need further examination, and I look into the ways that the excluded are enabled or prevented from influencing change later. There is recognition of the inherent problems associated with political participation, whereby without the political will and commitment, there is limited community or individual development. The implication here is that, without politicians’ and officers’ commitment, the existence of structures is not enough to lead automatically to more powerful citizens. This, together with the restoration of dignity through the act of listening and responding, is a precursor of commitment to social change (Ledwith, 1997: p.128). Hill’s analysis centres on the need to address the experience of powerlessness by establishing the ‘participatory equipment’ of arenas, procedures and institutions necessary to effect participation in the instigation of change. The existence of enabling structures and empowering mechanisms will be examined, as well as their effectiveness, and the challenges they throw up.

The assumption that policies to promote participation and empowerment necessarily reflect fundamental changes in power relations has been questioned then. Rather, they signal a shift in the political arena. An alternative definition of empowerment would argue that real change can only be seen with a breakdown of old systems of control and domination. The psychological, social, cultural and



ideological influences need to be understood. From this perspective, the constructive redefinition of roles would be necessary if local community-led initiatives are to be effective, and community perspectives acknowledged.

### The role of community development

Literature describing the role of bridging organisations highlights the significance of community development to the enactment and promotion of empowerment. It is here that the individual / community and structural aspects come together. Gary Craig (2008: p.26) examines the concept and practice of community development and capacity building in an attempt to support bottom-up empowerment and development. He identifies gaps in the politics and theory of community work (in Shaw, 2004: p.42), and is concerned that the field is damaged by disjointed and short-term constraints imposed by government policy. Craig concludes that there is a continuing government failure to acknowledge and engage with the fundamental structural reasons behind inequality and poverty. It appears that the route to meaningful empowerment is multifaceted, fragmented and complex.

The literature cites evidence of community development supporting people to become empowered and communities organised through gaining confidence, skill, knowledge, shared activity and network development. The individual and collective potential needs to go hand-in-hand with increased awareness and capacity building at an organisational and network level, if their potential is to be meaningfully released. The analysis of power and empowerment described by Taylor as inter-connected and flowing is pertinent here.

“If power is to flow through the system, these local circuits have to be linked into the social, political and economic circuits from which they have been cut off.” (2003: p.159)

This take on power sees local people and groups building their capacity at a local level. Neighbourhood empowerment values and acknowledges the contribution of local resources, involvement and ownership, and the potential power and energy

these hold. Taylor explores the potential for sharing power and the experience of empowerment.

“Promoted within the context of a move from government to governance, community participation and partnership policies have the potential to open up new public and political space. The partnership rhetoric implies a move from the fixed idea of power being rooted in the institution of the state to a more fluid idea of power shared, developed and negotiated between partners.” (2003: p.121)

The extent of evidence of this in West London will be examined subsequently, and its impact on personal and political empowerment experiences explored.

### New opportunities and spaces

A useful approach for the analysis of empowerment opportunities is Andrea Cornwall (2001, 2002, 2007) who distinguishes between ‘closed spaces’, top-down ‘invited spaces’ and bottom-up ‘claimed spaces’ in order to understand the interaction of power and knowledge on policy.

“...two broad kinds of policy spaces – those that are found in invited forums of participation created ‘from above’ by powerful institutions and actors, and those more autonomous spaces created ‘from below’ through more independent forms of social action on poverty related issues. By examining how different narratives of poverty and different actors interact in such spaces – as well as how they may be excluded from them – we can better understand the ways in which power and knowledge frame the policy process.” (Brock, Cornwall, Gaventa, 2001: p.3)

This is an area that is highly relevant to the investigation of different actors from different sectors experiences and understanding of empowerment.

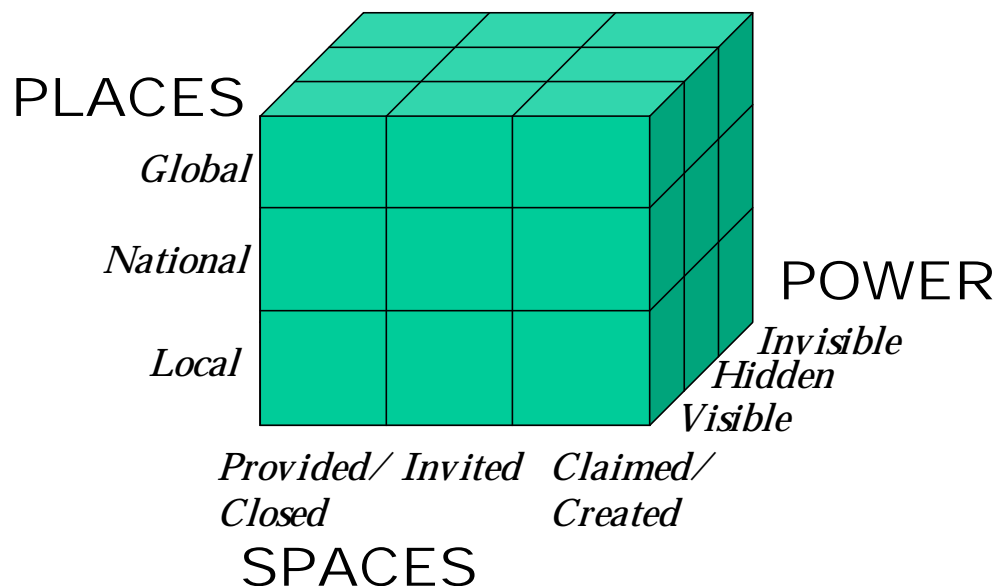
The move from government to governance is important to understanding the ways that recent policy change is impacting on communities. Policy and practice attempt to address social exclusion and engage with community and empowerment issues. The background is the acknowledged failure of government to tackle citizen needs,

and address disadvantage and marginalisation effectively. In response to growing political disengagement and social disintegration, government policy and initiatives are increasingly shifting emphasis to take on board and engage with these problems (Cornwall's 'invited spaces' referred to above). Taylor (2003: p.120) describes the recognition of the need for the government to develop an enabling and empowering role.

The policy context within which these questions of empowerment through participation, decision-making and practice are set is significant. Increasingly, community is being acknowledged as a powerful force with which to tackle social exclusion. In parallel, empowerment is seen as essential to the success of the participation agenda. National and local government policy and process are embracing community resources, knowledge, social capital and alternative ideas as a way of actively re-engaging people in addressing local problems. This raises some important questions around empowerment and the ability to impact on the decision-making process, set the agenda, shape choice and resolution, all of which will be explored in the following section on influence.

## Influencing change

The ability to influence change is considered here through an exploration of authors who have analysed the different ways that people can impact on decision-making. This has been usefully expanded upon by John Gaventa (2003c: p.8) using the Power Cube (pictured below) to look at the interaction of power with place and space. This dynamic model enables an appreciation of the interplay of power (with different degrees of visibility, from visible, to hidden and invisible), place (concerning the arenas and levels of engagement in the local, national and global) and space (locating how the arenas of power are created via provided / closed, invited, claimed / created spaces). Changes in participation are described by Gaventa (2003b: p.58) where there is a move from opportunities to rights, beneficiaries to citizens, projects to policies, consultation to decision-making, and micro to macro. The dynamism with which power operates is highlighted, also revealing the fact that different interests can be marginalised and inclusion strategies are needed to redress this, bringing us back to the need to generate opportunities to influence change.



(Gaventa, 2003: p.8)

The dynamic interaction of different actors with different degrees of power is significant. Returning to Cornwall's distinction between given and taken spaces this interaction is evident. Here too the concept of ownership has been identified as central to the experience of empowerment. The location of power inside and / or outside relates to these notions, and influences the positioning and ways in which people, places and power converge, as Cornwall explains.

“From the discursive framing that shapes what can be deliberated, to the deployment of technical language and claims to authority that reinstitutionalise existing cleavages in society, to the way the use of labels such as ‘users’ or ‘community members’ circumscribes the political agency of participants, power courses through every dimension of the participatory sphere. As ‘invited spaces’, the institutions of the participatory sphere are framed by those who create them, and infused with power relations and cultures of interaction carried into them from other spaces (Cornwall, 2002). These are spaces of power, in which forms of overt or tacit domination silence certain actors or keep them from entering at all (Gaventa, 2005). Yet these are also spaces of possibility, in which power takes a more productive and positive form: whether in enabling citizens to transgress positions as passive recipients and assert their rights or in contestations over ‘governmentality’ (Foucault 1991).” (Cornwall, 2007: p.10).

Taylor similarly questions the political process and the ability to actually make a difference, whether one struggles to initiate change from inside or outside the system. The existence of power elites and networks of patronage limit the inclusion of outsiders, reducing access to information and power.

“The dilemma is whether to become involved in the institutionalised political process and remain key agents of transformation within this, or assert autonomy and pressure from without – which may permit under-represented sections of society a voice not possible within the political process, but may not effect fundamental change.” (2003: p.175)

## Inside/out

'Insider spaces' are occupied by elected representatives, bureaucrats, state actors and experts who make decisions on behalf of others without consultation or involvement. These are the 'closed / uninvited spaces' referred to earlier (Gaventa, 2007), where barriers prevent certain issues and actors having a voice. 'Invited spaces' are where people are asked to participate by those with power and authority. Here there are relatively open public spaces, dialogue and participation. 'Claimed / created spaces' refers to the spaces generated by less powerful actors. In this arena power is gained through action or negotiation. Whether alliances can be built across these spaces, and what impact this has on empowerment is an area of particular interest given the changing perceptions of public authority and new spaces for engagement.

Others that have examined routes to influence include Wyn Grant who analyses the political system and the way opportunities to influence policy decisions *within* parliament can effect change. Insider and outsider interest groups are identified, along with the different strategies employed by each. Insider groups rely on establishing good contacts and work within the current power structure to influence policy by talking to civil servants and ministers, lobbying and encouraging them to advocate for their needs at the policy process level. Outsider groups without such contacts seek alternative channels using the media, courts, the passage of private members' bills to put their concerns on the policy agenda or more direct forms of advocacy and social action. The role and actions of pressure groups are explored with attention to how they operate and what they are able to achieve. According to Grant, public opinion is an important factor in pressure groups' ability to persuade and influence, but ultimately he sees them as unable to take decisions and wielding little effective power. Grant (1995: p.183) draws on Lukes' dimensions of power and highlights the influence of dominant interests and values that suppress challenges from outsider groups (ibid: p.182) reminiscent of Bourdieu's cultural and symbolic capital.

Dilys Hill explores the problems encountered when traditionally excluded groups and communities enter the realm of the political. A major issue lies in access and the ability to **set** the agenda, which also links back to Lukes' analysis.

“...the central issues are control over the agenda (which can still lie in the hands of the professionals), priorities in the use of resources and their distribution, and the groups claim to legitimacy: that is to represent the view of their members and to act ‘responsibly’ in the eyes of the authority. There are also crucial issues of access and support. To be effective, groups need structures and opportunities for involvement, skills support and other practical help, otherwise existing inequalities in input will merely be reinforced. In many cases, paternalism continues to mark the relationship and decision-making remains highly centralised, with groups’ inputs seen as an adjunct of, not a replacement for, representative democracy.” (Hill, 1994: p.50)

What opportunities actually exist to be heard and make a difference requires further exploration.

Discussion of the down-side of the empowerment experience has been well catalogued, including the problems encountered by those actively participating in political action. In ‘Transforming local governance. From Thatcherism to New Labour’ (2004: p.121), Gerry Stoker grapples with the reasons behind the perceived lack of public enthusiasm for political participation. Research evidence undertaken by Lowndes et al (2001: p.454) points toward the following reasons for the lack of participation: feeling alienated, lacking trust in the local authority, lacking awareness of opportunities to participate, fear of being ignored, that participation is not for ‘the likes of them’, or that the system is designed to exclude them. A critical point is whether contributions actually have any impact, or lack the power to influence the decision-making process.<sup>5</sup> Delivery and action that reflect locally generated ideas and solutions are necessary to build trust.

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<sup>5</sup> “...local people have a clear idea about what they would like to see to ensure effective participation (Lowndes et al 2001:p. 454), Succinctly stated in their own words, citizens’ core criteria were: a. ‘Has anything happened?; b. Has it been worth the money?; and c. Have they carried on talking to the public? Consultation works then when it is sensitive to the environment in which it operates and is seen to have delivered some shift in the frame of decision-making.” (Stoker 2004: p. 121)

The need for freedom of expression in meaningful debate between equals is stressed by Seyla Benhabib (1996: p.24) in the discourse model of ethical politics. However, when 'normal politics fail', social movements arise as collective efforts by the politically and socially marginalised to confront their experiences of inequality and injustice.

Marcy Darnovsky, Barbara Epstein and Richard Flacks see movement activity as challenging political and cultural conditions, as well as the social order and social theory. This position takes the debate beyond the realm of the political and looks at identity, society and culture.

"While traditional definitions usually focus on movement challenges to political structures, economic arrangements, and institutional rules, social movements – perhaps especially contemporary ones – also take on established cultural categories and social identities. Accordingly, social movements appear to be simultaneously spontaneous and strategic, expressive (of emotion and need) and instrumental (seeking some concrete ends), unruly and organised, political and cultural." (1995: p.vii)

### Outside/in

Outsider approaches include the way Foucault sees people's action as "revolt from below against the bureaucratisation of power." (1980: p.29, pp.34-5). Sidney Tarrow examines collective action as a means of exerting power and influencing change. The focus is on ordinary people acting together by 'contentious means' against opposition or the state, from the Civil Rights Movement to environmental action, from anti-war protest to eco-warriors. Looking at the role of power in these actions, Tarrow recognises the difference between that which can initiate and that which sustains: "The power to trigger sequences of collective action is not the same as the power to control or sustain them." (1998: p.23). Collective action has potency as the focus for the activation and exercise of power, spread amongst its



support base. However, with time, the very qualities that propelled it into action, can act destructively. Problems can be encountered when power is dispersed amongst its supporters creating the possibility of factionalism.

The formation and actions of social movements are a reflection of the broader political structures in society. Tarrow explores the formation and action of social movements in terms of the exertion of power against opponents or states, such that “their actions set in motion important political, cultural, and international changes.” (1998: p.2). The emergence of social movements is often in response to political constraints and opportunities, translating them into collective action, building structures of mobilisation in the practical, organisational and cultural resources on which they are founded. Tarrow argues that power can be gained when opportunities are grasped.

“The opening of opportunities produces external resources for people who lack internal ones, openings where there were only walls before, alliances that did not previously seem possible and realignments that seem capable of bringing new groups to power.” (1998: p.99)

I am interested in the extent to which people perceive that these opportunities are available to the individuals and organisations represented in this research, and how effective they believe they are in bringing about involvement and change.

A significant motivator for outsiders is the disparity between those with power and those without. Chris Wright recognises the problem of top-down control, where there is little or no communication between the powerful decision-makers and the powerless people who have to live with the decisions made in remote boardrooms, out of touch with the realities of the lives that are affected. Wright places communities at the heart of the decision-making process if meaningful solutions are to be reached “The four dimensions – personal responsibility, consensus, local currencies and community – overlap and reinforce one another, but ‘the greatest is community’.” (2000: p.27). The role of community involvement and ownership is highlighted as central to the resolution of problems at the neighbourhood level.

The critique of 'given spaces' questions the rationale behind them. The imposition of community participation and empowerment approaches is often linked to economic considerations, with a desire to 'enhance efficiency and effectiveness of investment' rather than support the genuine exertion of community power. According to the findings of 'Participation: the new tyranny?' the tool has been used more as a method of de-politicisation and disempowerment than democratisation and empowerment. According to Francis Cleaver the real power and decisions happen in another place and space, with "meaningful decision-making, interaction and collective action taking place elsewhere." (2001: p.44). Furthermore, without the material resources and structural support, community-based organisations are encumbered and disabled from progressing. Empowerment and engagement with the development process needs to be in place if ownership and meaningful development are to be realised. The broader dynamics of social and economic forces need to be understood if popular socio-political movements are to generate change.

### Inside and outside

Significant here is the location of those that link and form a bridge between the inside and the outside. There is relatively little in the theory concerning the role of facilitators and negotiators. This is an area that evidently requires further analysis. Taylor, Cornwall and Coelho do touch on this significant location however, and this is an area that will be developed later.

Positionality is linked to opportunities to access power, and the significance of intermediaries (both individuals and organisations) is raised by Cornwall and Coelho.

"...the need to unpack the category 'civil society', to examine critically who comes to represent citizens in the participatory sphere and the role that civil society organisations might play in enhancing access and democratising decision-making in this arena." (2007: p.6)

Taylor also argues that community development has a potential role in supporting people to take up opportunities of active citizenship and empowerment. This position sees the function of community development as intermediary, acting on behalf of the powerless, supporting, encouraging, negotiating and articulating their interests. Here, the role of community development enables 'outside' communities to use spaces to link to the 'inside' effectively, with scope for working on both sides of the equation, from the inside via 'invited spaces' **and** from the outside via social movements.

“...restoring community spirit; trying to make government more responsive to peoples' needs; engaging communities in the class struggle; organising around identity; political education and consciousness-raising; organising around service use; developing economic power and alternative forms of provision to the state. Its relationship with the state in this process has taken several different forms: making it work better and seeking to extend its provision, attacking it, defending it and now either acting as its agent or seeking to find the cracks in the system through which empowerment can be drawn. Different relationships have reflected different analysis of power and the state: from consensus and system failure to conflict and class interest, to a recognition of conflicts of interest with both state and community.” (1995: p.109).

The function of bridging and second-tier organisations is an aspect that I look at in more depth, analysing actors, their values and their views on the effectiveness of their organisations in the empowerment process, as well as potential drawbacks and limitations.

This section has explored literature that analyses the dynamics and opportunities for empowerment (Gaventa, Cornwall), influence and transformation through insider and outsider strategies (Taylor, Grant), as well as highlighting the problems of access and the ability to set the agenda (Hill). The significance of identity, society and culture are referenced in relation to 'outsiders' such as New Social Movements (Darnovsky, Epstein and Flacks), and evident in collective action (Tarrow). The centrality of community and involvement (Wright, Stoker) are

identified as enabling empowerment, whilst awareness of a lack of participation (Lowndes et al) and concern that real power is found elsewhere (Cleaver) impedes it. The notion of given and taken spaces (Cornwall, Gaventa) is analysed, and the opportunities afforded by community development and active citizenship (Taylor) highlighted as effective routes to empowerment.

The personal, cultural and institutional challenges associated with empowerment and community change have been discussed, exploring the options of working from inside, from outside, as well as the value of bridging organisations. Political participation and the need for institutional change have been identified as key to the development of empowerment and new forms of governance. As can be seen from the literature cited, the context, motives, rhetoric and reality of political influence are worlds apart. The review of the key themes examined in this chapter forms the foundation of this study. This leads on in the next chapter to an exploration of literature dealing with place, globalisation, the connection of the global and the local in the form of community, Diaspora and issues around representation, democracy and the policy context, all of which impact on community power.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Locating community and democracy in the current policy context**

#### **Place**

The real

The perceived

#### **Globalisation**

Globalisation debate

The implications of global inequality

#### **Community**

Definitions

Unifying potential

#### **Democracy in action**

Models

Challenges

Potential

Community voice

#### **Policy context**

Government policy framework

Developing community

#### **Literary foundations**

This chapter provides an opportunity to critique literature that examines themes relevant to and impacting upon empowerment. Locating community and democracy in the present policy framework the chapter begins by examining literature concerned with place, both the real and imagined. Globalisation literature sees the repercussion of global inequality, its effect on empowerment and the relevance of the different perspectives apparent in the globalisation debate. Definitions of community and its unifying potential are considered in the following section. Political engagement and community voice are examined in the section on democracy in action where literature exploring the different models of democracy, the challenges and potential are discussed. The policy context is reviewed with literature focusing on the Government policy framework and community development. This chapter concludes by pulling together the literature that will be tested against the research findings.

## **Place**

The environment within which this study is situated is the peopled city, and the power relations that are played out there. The literatures examining the location of power and the dynamics manifest in the social and physical terrain are touched on in this section. Both the real and the imagined sense of place will be considered. Furthermore, the relationships between the local, regional, national and global issues experienced by the different communities of interest will be explored within the spatial framework of the metropolis. The local and the global both impact on the here and the now.

### The real

The places and spaces of the city are carved up and reflect the social and economic divisions that exist in twenty-first century Britain, alongside its historical legacies. The reality of a divided society is evident all around us, reflected in people's living conditions, educational achievement, employment opportunities, wealth, health and life expectancy. The inner city experience is being addressed by policy implementation in the hope of tackling the polarisation of the urban condition. For Hill, the centrality of power in relation to the city and its inhabitants is clear.

“The economic and political problems of the cities highlight the question of the extent to which all can share equally as citizens in the life of cities. The polarisation of rich and poor, of affluent and decayed neighbourhoods, and of those with secure jobs and those with no jobs or casualised employment, has generated a debate on dependency and powerlessness. The dependency relation is a power relation; in recognising this, it is necessary to reaffirm the centrality of our mutual interdependence as active human participants in a common endeavour.” (1994: p.243)

There is an enormous amount of literature exploring the physical urban terrain and the associated social landscapes, from Frederick Engels' observations of

Manchester's Victorian slums, to the description of the flaneur in the European city arcades described by Walter Benjamin, or the expressions of contemporary writers depicting an increasingly complex globalised cityscape. The expressions of the dynamics of power are revealed in the physical **and** social environments, each intimately inter-related.

The evolution of the city, it has been argued, is the evolution of competing communities of interest. The physical layout of urban spaces reflects the political vision of the powerful, which effectively excludes the least powerful members of society from political participation and debate. Henri Lefebvre looks at the urban reality in crisis when political advantage erodes civil rights.

“To exclude the urban from groups, classes, individuals, is to exclude them from civilisation, if not from society itself. The right to the city legitimates the refusal to allow oneself to be removed from urban reality by a discriminatory and segregative organisation. This right of the citizen (if one wants, of ‘man;’) proclaims the inevitable crisis of city centres based on segregation and establishing it: centres of decision-making, wealth, power, of information and knowledge, which reject towards peripheral spaces all those who do not participate in political privileges.” (1996: p.195)

Lefebvre's ‘representational spaces’ refers to the **lived** space, where the real and imaginary landscapes are mixed together, describing territorial depiction, interpretation and portrayal by the inhabitants of that place. This definition helps explain the complex nature of spatial experiences, and the different narratives used to describe the same geographical domain. Edward Soja explores this concept of space and its characteristics.

“...these lived spaces of representation are thus a terrain for the generation of ‘counterspaces’, spaces of resistance to the dominant order arising precisely from their subordinate, peripheral or marginalised positioning.” (1996: p.67)

Clearly, historically divisive approaches to development have resulted in a divided society, with an urban landscape reflecting the economic divide. The resulting



social landscape mirrors this physical terrain, with fractured lives and social division. Space is not a simple geographic entity. Fran Tonkiss links spatial inequality to social inequality, calling for both to be addressed in the pursuit of community and spatial cohesion.

“Principles of social justice invariably open on to a politics of space. Questions of equity and distribution are played out across physical spaces, while objectives of cohesion invoke a vision of an inclusive arena of citizenship.” (2000: p.597).

The way that space is experienced and perceived is as much about the imagined as the real. The experience and reality of a community is likewise differently interpreted depending on time, space, experience, context and so on. Les Back and Michael Keith (1999: p.133) point out that “‘community’ is as much a narrative product as an organic achievement. We are working between the representation of space (‘the conceived’) and the spaces of representation (‘the lived’)...” The interface between the two spaces is the place where two worlds collide, and the point of potential useful revelation. Analysing expressions concerning the real and perceived experiences of different actors from diverse lived and conceived environments will reveal their similarities and differences.

Neighbourhoods are more than just bricks and mortar. Every person within that locale has experienced life differently, and with these different life experiences, alongside varying perceptions based on gender, race, age, culture, class, education and consciousness, the views are potentially as varied as the people themselves. Urban planners, local authority officers and bureaucrats may well define and describe an area differently than the communities residing there, or the community groups based there, in the peopled city. Iain Chambers (1986: p.183) explores the urban reality as “not single but multiple, that inside the city there is always another city.” The metropolis is experienced almost as a parallel universe, with the hidden and the official versions.

In relation to the built environment, uneven social and spatial developments are the material manifestation of conflict and difference, as expressed by Raymond Pahl,

“The built environment is the result of conflicts, in the past and present, between those with different degrees of power in society – landowners, planners, developers, estate agents, local authorities...[and]...The social structure is the key to the spatial structure.” (1974: p.86). Uneven development in the post-modern city reflects the inherent inequality prevalent in the forces behind its evolution. Processes of social and spatial fragmentation, polarisation and segregation impact upon the urban landscape. City spaces are constructed and delineated by class and ethnic differences, the boundary between public and private exemplifying this division.

### The perceived

Bringing the human experience to the fore, it becomes clear that no two people perceive the world in the same way. Even if they have similar profiles, their varied life experiences will nurture different worldviews. This can be seen in the ways people living in the same neighbourhood experience and describe it quite differently. Recognition of the relativity of understanding is explained by Allan Pred (1997: p.120) who argues that there can be no grand history or grand human geography. Instead, the post industrialist perspective is pursued “Through their engagement in a multitude of situated practices, through their participation in a multitude of juxtaposed power relations, people make a multitude of histories and construct a multitude of human geographies.”

The range of factors affecting a person's sense of place, space and identity converge differently on each individual, described by Chambers.

“This is the tangled undergrowth of another city and of a cultural formation that loses its strands in the labyrinth of kinship, street culture, local identities, popular memory and urban folklore.” (1994: p.105)

This communicates the complex interweaving maze of experience and expression that come together in the making of an area. The identity of a place and the representation of space are not static or one-dimensional, neither are urban settings divorced from associations and the imagination. The physical geography

of a place only tells part of the story, and even this is infused with meaning and history. The physicality of a place, its design and creation, all bear the scars of history. The peopled city, carries other histories, lays down new meanings, develops unexpected uses, acts out dramas and ascribes diverse realities. In 'Thirdspace' Soja speaks of real and imagined places.

"Space is simultaneously objective and subjective, material and metaphorical, a medium and outcome of social life; actively both an immediate milieu and an originating presupposition, empirical and heritable, instrumental, strategic, essential." (1996: p.45)

The issues of the imagined and the real, lived and perceived spaces form part of the narrative of the city. This review of the literature exploring place has thrown up a multiplicity of meanings that reflect the urban experience, some of which inform the lines of enquiry pursued here. Spatial and social representation impacts on perceptions and experiences of power and empowerment, and needs to be considered when analysing different actors' views.

## **Globalisation**

Connections of the local vis-a-vis the global are explored here, linking the research area with current theoretical debates about globalisation and relating this to experiences of empowerment. Despite disagreements concerning causality, there seems to be agreement on the reality of inequality on a global scale. This inequality has clear implications for the articulation and experience of power. For Kevin Robins (2000: p.201) the process of globalisation is the result of a complex interplay of cultural and economic dynamics that involves 'confrontation, contestation and negotiation.' For our purposes, it is the changing manifestation of power and its impact that we are concerned with. The contemporary world order and globalisation must affect the exercise and experience of power in the local.

### Globalisation debate

The analysis of the global city needs first to be located within the framework of the globalisation debate. This concept has been used to describe the ways the city is shaped by and is shaping global economic forces. A brief look at the global city will lead on to a consideration of community and the peopled city, adding the human dynamic.

Globalisation is a strongly contested concept, dividing academics, economists, politicians and global citizens alike. Politicians and economists promote the benefits of increased trade, better communication networks and closer world integration; whilst anti-globalisation protestors demonstrate against the I.M.F., W.T.O. and G7 summits, along with the detrimental impact of neo-colonialism on a global scale. The analysis of globalisation remains deeply divided and full of tensions and contradictions.

From the global perspective, David Held links issues of power with infrastructure, internationalisation, and the nature of power as all pervasive, touching all aspects of our lives.

“...power is a phenomenon found in and between all groups, institutions and societies, cutting across public and private life. While ‘power’, thus understood, raises a number of complicated issues, it usefully highlights the nature of power as a universal dimension of human life, independent of any specific site or set of institutions.” (Held et al. 2000: p.58)

This global understanding of power fits with the theories of Foucault, Freire and Taylor, seeing power as fluid, dynamic and all pervasive.

The reordering of the organising principles of the world order and social life can be identified in globalist literature in the transformation of dominant patterns of socio-economic organisation. The globalist perspective sees a gulf between the sites and subjects of power across the world.

“At the core of the globalist account lies a concern with power: its instrumentalities, configuration, distribution, and impacts. Globalisation is taken to express the expanding scale on which power is organised and exercised. In this respect, it involves the reordering of power relations between and across the world’s major regions such that the key sites of power and those who are subject to them are often oceans apart.” (David Held and Andrew McGrew, 2000: p.8)

This perspective sees new patterns of inequality and wealth emerging under new interregional economic relations and the associated global division of labour.

### The implications of global inequality

The global picture must be recognised if a fuller appreciation of the dynamics of inequality, empowerment and exclusion is to be achieved. Self-reliance, control and autonomy in decision-making cannot be realised in an environment of hostility and scepticism, restrictive global economic forces, the related wealth inequalities and constraining power dynamics. The experience of globalisation, the organisation of capitalism and the centralising role of corporate and financial institutions has resulted in “... the virtual exclusion of vast numbers of the world’s poor from effective economic and political participation.” (Friedmann, 1992: p.14)

Global inequality is a reality of the modern epoch, manifest in the experience of binary opposites throughout the globe, described by Manuel Castells.

“Thus, overall, the ascent of informational, global capitalism is indeed characterised by simultaneous economic development and underdevelopment, social inclusion and social exclusion, in a process very roughly reflected in comparative statistics. There is polarisation in the distribution of wealth at the global level, differential evolution of intra-country income inequality, and substantial growth of poverty and misery in the world at large, and in most countries, both developed and developing.” (2000: p.352)

Globalisation has reshaped the urban environment, with the development of internationalised world cities that are integrated with global economies that are often divorced from the local context. This is having an impact on individuals and communities, at a neighbourhood level and at government level, as the local and global agendas come together at a human level, across borders. There are clear repercussions of globalisation on a world-wide scale, and the personal stories on a local level. These are the stories that will be picked up on in this study, the complex relationships that transcend a limited analysis and have a direct impact on experiences of empowerment.

The globalisation debate and the discussion of the spatial landscape draws attention to the local vis-à-vis the global. In particular, I would like to highlight London as a global city (as expressed by the research participants). Firstly, London is a powerful global force and home to the world finance centre in the City of London. Secondly, it is the locale of one of the largest international airports, Heathrow, with all of the related global implications. Thirdly, London has had a thriving economy, with international trade, the exchange of goods, intellectual property and people. Fourthly, London has an incredibly mixed population, home to long established communities, migrant workers, refugees and new arrivals. All of these factors demonstrate the global character of the local habitus that is London. This has key implications for communities and community action in West

London, the focus of my study. The social and economic concerns now reach beyond the local to the global and vice versa, as communities address their shifting realities and the changing terrain.

## **Community**

The concept of Diaspora connects the global with the local, and leads on to a review of the literature based on the analysis of community. An appreciation of the definitions and debates about community are significant to my research, and inform my understanding and reading of the notion. Diaspora has relevance in relation to people's sense of identity and their perception of the self, both locally and with ties across the globe. The concept and experience of Diaspora pulls together the experiences of the individual with the community, the local with the global, and globalisation with the community. Used to describe the experience of dispersed ethnic / cultural communities, the key experience is that of displacement<sup>6</sup>. Of relevance here is the link between the global city and the lived experiences of communities of people within that global city.

### Definitions

Conflicts exist over who constitutes and represents 'the community' and what community actually signifies. Community is a categorical identity that is based on the construction of 'the other' and on various forms of exclusion. Difference and diversity are linked with polarisation and division, which are associated with a hierarchy of power by which some people are excluded and marginalised, and others are not. Citizenship and community cannot be looked at in isolation. These phenomena exist within the realm of notions of public and private, of the state and the economy, of the powerful and the powerless.

The term community has a broad range of definitions, depending on the psychological, historical and political motivations behind its use. According to Willmott (1986: p.83) there are communities of interest, place communities and communities of attachment. These are created and shaped by the complex forces behind socially and symbolically constructed communities according to Castells (1997: p.31). For Scott Lash (1994: p.218) communities are manifest through an

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<sup>6</sup> The experience of displacement not necessarily being all negative however.



appreciation of shared meaning. Attempts to explain and explore notions of community are numerous, and I shall reference those that resonate with my research question, such as Mayo, who depicts the term in the following passage: (there are) “varying and contested meanings of the notion of ‘community’, whether ‘community’ has been defined in terms of geography or in terms of common interests and identities.” (2000: p.36). She sees the term as being used as a description **and** a prescription, going on to use a variety of working definitions, including descriptive (as a group of people who share something in common), normative (as a place with solidarity, coherence and participation) and instrumental (as an agent acting to maintain or change its circumstances). All of these have relevance depending on one’s position, intention and context.

Community discourse has been challenged for oversimplifying the complex reality of community experience and meaning. Community has been described as representing opposing forces set within a particular context, “...we may see the community as the site of both solidarity and conflict, power and social structures” where there is evidence of the “...shifting, historically and socially located nature of community institutions, the power dimensions of public manifestations of collective action.” (Cleaver, 2001: p.45).

Communities are social constructs which at the same time have the potential to be inclusive and exclusive. To belong to a community at once sets you apart from others. By its very nature, the city brings together different kinds of people living in relative proximity to one another, sharing spaces and services, however they do not belong to a single community. The real and imagined communities of place and interest describe the complexity of identity.

“**Communities of interest** reflect the common material concerns or characteristics of their members and/or the issues of common interest around which they group.... **Communities of place** can be thought of as a particular kind of imagined community.” (Danny Burns, Robin Hambleton and Paul Hoggett, 1994: p.227)

According to Anthony Cohen (1985: p.12) “‘Community’ thus seems to imply

simultaneously both similarity and difference. The word thus expresses a relational idea: the opposition of one community to others or to other social entities.” Belonging to a community is by definition set apart from others. Cohen goes on to consider ‘the boundary’ as the embodiment of discrimination between communities. Communities may be based on class, race, culture, religion, politics, location, employment, role, education, interests, all coexisting and overlapping with one another, creating a complex mesh of inter-relationships, and potentially conflicting interests. One individual may belong to several communities, defined by the person as well as by the society in which they operate, and serving several different purposes from personal and cultural identity statement, through to bureaucratic tool to categorise, organise or control. This research explores a variety of different communities of interest and place, with overlapping identities and understandings, and experiencing different degrees of power, focusing upon gaining new understanding and appreciation of peoples’ sense of community.

Hoggett (1997: p.14) also conceptualises community as a political concept, acknowledging the gap between government on the one hand and marginalised communities on the other, with excluded communities enduring the experience of powerlessness.

“Communities represent only one set of ‘stakeholders’, and are generally much less powerful than other ‘stakeholders’ (e.g. local authorities, central government, private developers) that command far greater resources and thus dominate the urban policy process.” (1997: p.220)

This conceptualisation takes into account inherent inequalities that affect access to power. These inequalities need to be addressed if community empowerment is to be realised.

### Unifying potential

Ledwith focuses on the notion of community as a route to tackling powerlessness through unity in the community, “The process is one of action and reflection. People in coming together out of a common interest, people identify their own

experiences of powerlessness.” (1997: p.13). These communities of identity or shared interest can be a device for collective empowerment and a strategy for countering the experience of inequality or oppression. Historically, many social movements have been associated with socialist principles, in that they are collective in nature, and opposed to state domination<sup>7</sup>. Alison Gilchrist (2004: p.36) recognises that more recently, the community sector favours an alternative egalitarian, network-based and organisational structure, as opposed to hierarchical and competitive ones.

In the U.K. the history of community action in the urban context that draws communities together has developed around both communities of interest and of place, challenging the threats experienced as residents and / or as services have been eroded. Community social action is often about both unity and struggle. They have the potential however, to be either regressive or progressive, depending on the cause, content and collective concern.

Individuals unite as communities of interest and / or of place, as a route to articulate the needs of the community to local and / or central government. For example, one of the major roles of the voluntary sector is to promote constructive change, either directly by pressurising governments or corporate bodies, or indirectly by demonstrating alternative possibilities. The role of pressure groups in publicising information and challenging corporate behaviour plays an important role in exposing discrimination and striving to improve the quality of life for local people according to Kate Nash (2000: p.160). Although she also points out that some social movements’ heterogeneous make-up can also limit their role and reach (ibid: p.165). However, the brokering role of the second-tier community sector can be seen as playing an important function in terms of advocating on behalf of marginalised communities. I shall return to the role played by front-line community workers later and in particular their bridging position between residents and the local authority. This role has the potential to be either positive/enabling or negative/impeding.

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<sup>7</sup> But not necessarily so.

The communities of interest and of place described by Burns, Hambleton and Hoggett (1994: p.227) are a useful way of defining them as social constructs built around the collective glue of identity or interest. However, the definition does not extend far enough to embrace the complex multi-layered and often contradictory experience of community (Nash, 2000: p.65). The problematic and contested nature of community is central to unpacking the challenges and potential of the current policy context and community empowerment.

## **Democracy in action**

Moving on from an understanding of community into the realm of the political, an appreciation of the potential of democracy will be considered. Models of democracy will be examined, along with the challenges and opportunities afforded. Addressing global / local inequalities, reaching communities, tackling disadvantage and confronting the democratic deficit are all issues on the participation agenda. At this juncture, referencing the different democratic models will be useful in order to understand the implications they have on political participation, the potential to influence decision-making and opportunities for empowerment. There is recognition of the limitations and the potential of both traditional representative democracy and more participative / deliberative / associative approaches to democracy. Appreciation of the contributions and interaction of these different approaches is relevant in the light of existing policy and practice. The democratic deficit and the shortcomings of representative democracy have raised challenges that government policies have been attempting to address. This brief look at literature examining different democratic systems will enable a discussion based on political engagement, civic participation, policy intervention, access to power and community empowerment.

### Models

The basic premise on which democracy is based is described by Joshua Cohen (1996: p.95) as follows, “The fundamental idea of democratic legitimacy is that the authorisation to exercise state power must arise from the collective decisions of the members of a society who are governed by that power.” The idea is that societies’ collective authority is transmitted through social and political institutions, but can only be as effective as its composite parts. In this idealised model, the exercise of collective political power is based on debate among equals. Cohen goes on to clarify the need for a commitment toward citizen involvement and debate.

“The deliberative conception of democracy is organised around an ideal of political justification. According to this ideal, justification of the exercise of

collective political power is to proceed on the basis of a free public reasoning among equals. A deliberative democracy institutionalises this ideal. Not simply a form of politics, democracy, on the deliberative view, is a framework of social and institutional conditions for participation, association, and expression – and ties the authorisation to exercise public power (and the exercise itself) to such discussion – by establishing a framework ensuring the responsiveness and accountability of political power to it through regular competitive elections, conditions of publicity, legislative oversight, and so on.” (ibid: p.99)

There are other aspects to consider, however, when it comes to democracy and empowerment issues. Friedmann returns to basics in his analysis of the existence of the state, suggesting that if it only exists to protect the common good of the citizens, then a strong political community is desirable. In order for a community to have control over its ‘life space’ however, it needs to be capable of asserting itself, and the state must be accountable. For Friedmann this can only be achieved with an open political space where public encounters and mobilisation can occur.

“Inclusive democracy incorporates a fine and real division of powers; it insists on accountability as a central process and secures an open political space for civil encounter and mobilisation. Such a democracy, which includes all potential interests and concerns, will assign a significant role to organised civil society, including the very poor, in the making of public decisions at all relevant levels.” (1992: p.81)

How effective these structures actually are is of concern. There is a need to challenge simplistic accounts of political engagement that don’t address the contradictions and failings of the current political system.

### Challenges

Inequalities and differential access to power and decision-making have come to characterise our political reality. Richard Flacks’ analysis of the demise of Western democracy identifies the problems associated with marginalisation and alienation from the political processes, an area of concern in this research.

“...some groups who had previously felt represented...were experiencing the established political framework as irrational and closed. Elite domination of the state and the political parties frequently thwarted the popular will; at the same time, radical, ethnic, and other organised minorities were necessarily disadvantaged within the electoral process. A number of movement projects were initiated in that period whose purpose was to restructure electoral and government processes.” (1995: p.252)

Flacks points toward a role for community activists in setting the agenda, achieved by lobbying for national legislation in support of the devolution of power, neighbourhood empowerment and the inclusion of local people in decisions affecting them. This is also outlined in the Governments 2008 White Paper.

“Such an agenda would include establishing national rules requiring the inclusion of community voices in corporate decisions that affect localities, and providing major national resources to support community planning, development, ownership, and control aimed at sustainable local and regional economies.” (Ibid: p.262)

This is far from having been the situation up to now, however. Ledwith describes this reality.

“We have witnessed and been party to a system of domination that claims to act in the interests of freedom and democracy, yet which has exploited the poorest in society for the gain of the powerful and privileged.” (1997: p.1)

She goes on to point out that poverty is a political construct and that transformative action is needed to address the effects of inequality and poverty. Ledwith argues for radical social transformation through understanding the nature of injustice and the development of workable alternatives, concluding that true democracy thinks globally and acts locally. She recognises the need to see empowerment within the wider context and highlights the commitment to challenge the socially embedded and historically entrenched dynamics of power. In order to achieve social justice and equality a holistic strategy is required, and I return to the perspective described by Ledwith which resonates with this point of view.

“empowerment is a collective concept: it relates to relations of power and oppression in society and is part of a transformative strategy for social

justice and democracy. Its analysis lies at the individual, institutional, structural and global levels at which oppression, discrimination and exploitation impact according to class, gender, age, disability, ethnicity and sexual preference – an inherently political project.” (Ibid: p.148)

## Potential

In considering the potential of political engagement, different authors have highlighted varied concerns. In ‘Hegemony and new political subjects: towards a new concept of democracy’ Chantal Mouffe describes a political transformation that could achieve her vision of equality and freedom. I am interested in discovering how far local activists consciously pursue a vision of equality and freedom, or whether the constraints they are faced with have tempered their goals.

“If to speak of socialism still means anything, it should be to designate an extension of democratic revolution to the entirety of social relations and the attainment of a radical, libertarian, and plural democracy. Our objective, in other words, is none other than the goal de Tocqueville perceived as that of democratic peoples, that ultimate point where freedom and equality meet and fuse, where people ‘will be perfectly free because they are entirely equal, and where they will all be perfectly equal because they are entirely free.’ (2000: p.309).

Beginning with the features of democratic structures, Landry also questions the systems of democratic governance, but with a somewhat different focus, suggesting that stakeholder democracy is better suited to addressing urban concerns. How useful and accessible these structures are in bringing about involvement and empowerment is worthwhile considering.

“But good governance is a competitive tool in urban affairs. It could be questioned whether unpaid councillors, drawn from a narrow section of the population and affiliated to a handful of political parties, should have ultimate control over urban affairs. Beyond such elected bodies there are always groups of committed individuals willing to contribute to making urban life better,



which is allowing the concept of stakeholder democracy to gain currency, in turn leading to new forms of municipal departmental structures being set up.” (2000: p.38)

Local councillors, politicians, as well as community representatives and activists all have a role to play in effecting change in this model.

In parallel, Hirst (1994 and 2001: p.23) describes Associative Democracy which sees social changes that undermine corporatist governance as an alternative to state intervention and the market. The idea is that government tasks are devolved to self-governing voluntary associations. This model incorporates community organisations and activists with their local knowledge and awareness of issues firmly into the system of governance. The claim is that extending democratic control in a practical manner to a local level would result in better informed decisions being made, thus improving economic and social governance. This position is something that the politically motivated grassroots organisations have long been arguing and which will be explored through discussion with local neighbourhood activists.

### Community voice

Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson speak of the desirability of community participation in the political arena in order to overcome experiences of exclusion from the urban development process. The creation of opportunities for dialogue is identified as central to addressing the challenges emerging from exclusion and alienation.

“...the need for local communities – however these are defined – to be involved in the decisions that are going to affect their lives on a daily basis if exclusions and marginalities are to be addressed. Any urban intervention will produce conflicting outcomes and no one solution will suit all groups. Recognising this, and refusing the idea that universal solutions are possible, means building into the processes of governance and government spaces for contestation and disagreement, so that politics can remain in play in the

policy process rather than being cast to the sidelines in the drive for entrepreneurial advantage in the competitive market for cities.” (2000: p.515).

This model has its critics, however, pointing out the dangers of localism and the concern of ‘un-representativeness’. Other problems include the pursuit of self interest, and a single issue focus. John Gaventa’s Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (2004) report identifies the key challenges faced by neighbourhood representation. This research looks into the struggles associated with involvement and representation, using case studies and testimonials to identify how people understand and address these challenges.

Community voice is now being recognised as important within political and economic circles. The reason why this is so should itself be questioned. For our purposes, the matter of democratic involvement, ownership and citizenship all being placed on the global, national and local agenda, is significant.<sup>8</sup> However, one must be conscious of the motives behind the interests of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank in local political engagement. These institutions’ support for participation comes with a particular set of agendas which need to be acknowledged and understood. Participation is something of a double-edged sword, fulfilling government agendas, whilst having the potential to empower and work for the community.

Despite these reservations about motive and agency, this research is concerned with identifying where there is common-ground across the sectors. I am interested in exploring where active participation and the empowerment agenda are supported, from both inside and outside, from the community and statutory sectors. Evidence for this within the literature can be seen in Taylor’s work, “There are allies and champions within the system, there are chinks of light hidden amongst the critiques... and there is a demand from communities for more voice.” (2003: p.139)

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<sup>8</sup> “The role of social capital amongst people is now recognised by even the World Bank. This reflects at least the acceptance of the possibilities of a multitude of voices at the universal level. These voices demand ‘deep democracy’, which in turn demands deepened values of human rights.” (Gundara 2002: p.21.)

Citizenship and democratic engagement are finding expression through participation in community organisations and action, in the assertion of social and cultural identities in recognition of diversity and community cohesion, and in debate, disagreement and dialogue at local, national and international levels. Jagdish Gundara demonstrates the contemporary political expressions of awareness and engagement.

“In the contemporary British context, being an active member of a local street association, being Scottish or Welsh, British, European and a global citizen are all consistent with the notion of deep citizenship. The acceptance of democratic engagement, which includes the recognition of areas of disagreement, can only be inculcated if groups feel that they are part of the polity and have a stake in it.” (2002: p. 21)

Democratic renewal is also very much on the agenda of politicians and government representatives. The successful balancing of interests and managing of conflicts is a challenge requiring creativity, and described by Taylor.

“Achieving a balance between cohesion and diversity, leadership and participation, and the tensions between focusing inwards and scaling up to act in the wider environment: these will all likewise be moving targets.” (2003: p. 195)

This will be explored in this study of the mechanisms and structures of involvement, as well as through a review of current policies, considering how far they address these challenges.

## **Policy context**

An examination of the policy framework relating to empowerment reveals government directives concerning devolution, as well as the competing aims and tensions in policy. This analysis explores literature that sees increasing spaces for empowerment with a more optimistic take on the potential these opportunities offer, as well as those that raise more structural perspectives and issues. Processes of transformation are explored as ways to meet the challenges of the policy framework, concluding with Taylor's analysis identifying the potential alongside the constraints. Here the role of community development workers, bridging and networking organisations is developed, building on ideas raised in the previous chapter.

### Government policy framework

Devolution in the U.K. has been a central government objective since Labour's election in 1997 and has involved constitutional reform and policy commitments to the decentralisation of power. The devolution of power and related policies have clear relevance to my area of study, with key factors such as service modernisation, addressing the demographic deficit, increasing participation and tackling social deprivation central to this process. The formation and independence of the Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Parliament in 1997, and the Northern Ireland Assembly in 1998, illustrate this devolution of power at the national level.<sup>9</sup> However, there are different agendas and contradictory tensions between these policies and new spaces and the new challenges for communities.

Different government administrations have dealt with public participation and local political renewal quite differently. According to the 'Modern local government: in touch with the people' White Paper:

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<sup>9</sup> [www.dca.gov.uk](http://www.dca.gov.uk) and [www.direct.gov.uk](http://www.direct.gov.uk)

“...the Government wishes to see consultation and participation embedded into the culture of all councils....and undertaken across a wide range of each council's responsibilities.” (D.E.T.R. 1998: para. 4.6).

The Labour government has expressed a commitment to encourage political life in order to achieve social and economic success. According to Stoker “The overall aim has been to restore some political vitality to institutions that were judged to have lost touch with the public.” (2004: p.108). Like Hill, Stoker sees effective communication at the heart of public engagement such that the government needs to be open and responsive. It has been acknowledged that in order to design and implement better policies and services, public servants and politicians need to be in touch with public opinion. The question is whether such improved communication is evident and effective in reaching those at the margins as well as in the mainstream.

By 2006 plans to devolve power from the state and local authorities, to community groups and individuals were developed. Labour Minister David Miliband described the Labour vision to tackle the ‘power gap’ and empower local people to control their own lives. His speech to the National Council for Voluntary Organisations' annual conference set out the plan.

"I call it 'double devolution' - not just devolution that takes power from central government and gives it to local government, but power that goes from local government down to local people, providing a critical role for individuals and neighbourhoods, often through the voluntary sector." (2006)

Before these aims were implemented, however, there was a change of ministerial responsibility. March 2008 saw the subsequent announcement of plans for the ‘Empowerment’ White Paper by Communities Secretary Hazel Blears. Here the emphasis is on the government's commitment to empower citizens and give local people greater power over their life. Building on the previous ‘Strong and prosperous communities’ and utilising the ‘Community empowerment action plan’, the focus is on the devolution of power under the themes of encouraging active citizenship / local democracy, improving local public services, work and enterprise for all, and strengthening local leadership and accountability. Central government's overall aim of service modernisation and delivery, with engagement

in devolved structures and governance, sits alongside active citizenship and participation plans. However, there are clear tensions between the civic and civil aspects of this agenda.

The 'Unlocking the talent of our communities' paper describes the government rationalisation and measures to meet the challenges of life in the U.K. today.

“This is a government committed to unlocking the talents, not of some of the people, but of all of the people. We want to see every region, city, town and neighbourhood do well, not just the few. Our national prosperity and competitiveness depend on our ability to tap into the creativity, energy, ingenuity and skills of the British people.”<sup>10</sup> (2008)

The focus on addressing enduring social, economic and political challenges acknowledges the problems evident in contemporary British society and offers possible solutions. Government think tanks and publications analyse the difficulties and recommend answers.

Since the fieldwork for this research was completed<sup>11</sup>, the July 2008 government White Paper 'Communities in control: real people, real power' stresses the devolution of control and influence to more people and transferring power to communities<sup>12</sup>. The paper aims to act as a catalyst for change, address contemporary challenges and question the roots of unequal access: “Our key themes are power, influence and control: who has power, on whose behalf is it exercised, how is it held to account, and how can it be diffused throughout the communities we live in. It is about democracy, and how democratic practices and ideals can be applied to our complex, modern society.”

There is evidence of the contradictory agendas behind New Labour's focus on engagement at the neighbourhood level, however. There are tensions between democratic renewal and the commitment to community empowerment on the one

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<sup>10</sup> The paper continues: “The Government has made great strides – by conquering mass unemployment and youth unemployment; by tackling failing public services and driving school standards up; and by tackling head on the challenges of child poverty. But the work never ends. There are still too many young people not getting the chances they deserve, too many neighbourhoods marred by worklessness, too many people unaware of the opportunities which could be open to them.”

<sup>11</sup> The fieldwork for this research was completed before the White Paper was implemented.

<sup>12</sup> From [www.communities.gov.uk/communities/communityempowerment/communitiesincontrol/](http://www.communities.gov.uk/communities/communityempowerment/communitiesincontrol/)

hand, versus centralised political and economic controls on the other. There are also tensions between modernising services via individual choice on the one hand, and community empowerment on the other. There has been a shift away from the over-centralisation and personalisation of the Blair years, as Brown proposed administrative changes (July 2007) that would alter the power distribution and relations between government executive and legislative branches. These are set against the reality of the democratic deficit. Following a more recent change of Secretary of State there has been a move away from empowerment agendas, indicating just how vulnerable these policies actually are in practice. New Labour's approaches in recent years, and the inherent contradictions involved, set the context for this research, as the experiences and environments of the different actors are exposed, and the tensions and conflicts tackled.

### Developing community

Addressing the experience of powerlessness and exclusion is critical to the success of participation policies however, and it would appear that there is a need for a holistic approach to the complexities of multiple deprivation, alienation and inequality. Social exclusion is a relative concept and experience, which frames notions of community and civil society. The use of reciprocity, participation, social capital and networking as routes toward community empowerment should be seen in relation to the social context in which they are set. Furthermore, questioning assumptions that perpetuate division is necessary such as the idea that excluded communities are lacking in these forms of social cohesion. Taylor challenges this theory as unfounded and inaccurate.

“One set of assumptions is that community has somehow been lost in excluded areas, another is that the basis for engagement exists on which people themselves can rebuild the ties that have been lost; and a third is that ‘community’ is what excluded communities need.” (2003: p.75)

Community development has a potential role as a means of addressing these hierarchical divisions and working across boundaries from above and from below.

However, the role of intermediary bodies and individuals is significant in that they have the potential to act as gatekeepers and sources of further exclusion, **or**, as facilitators, bridging gaps and promoting empowerment. This distinction is important as there is documentation in the literature of both practices, resulting in empowerment being inhibited **or** enabled.

Many authors write of the opportunities, processes and structures needed in order to encourage and shape local participation and political engagement. Hill references the role of local elites and the voluntary sector acting as brokers of concerns and demands at a neighbourhood level, with the capacity to mobilise support and influence change. Palma (1988) in contrast sees community organisations as the place where people are able to experiment, challenge, debate, struggle, find solidarity and ‘learn the praxis of democracy’ in the early stages of conscious collective action in the face of contentious politics. Citizen and community participation help to shape a common social purpose and sense of belonging, whilst encouraging debate and balancing different interests. I explore these ideas and the ways they also serve the purpose of connecting the individual, via community, to the wider society and ultimately to global considerations.

Capacity building<sup>13</sup> and community development have a potentially empowering role. The significance of collective challenges, whether or not they are sustained, is that they have the power to raise issues, put them on the agenda and clearly demonstrate popular support. “They often succeeded, but even when they failed, their actions set in motion important political, cultural, and international changes” (Tarrow, 1998: p.2). The collective challenge brings people together as a clearly identifiable vocal focal point for like-minded people, locally and increasingly globally creates constituencies of support. The evolving social networks are based on a shared sense of meaning and have the potential to impact on the political arena and its agendas.

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<sup>13</sup> Capacity building is the process of building the capabilities of individuals or organisations so that they develop the fluidity, flexibility and functionality to adapt to the changing needs of the community it serves.



“When their struggles revolve around broad cleavages in society, when they bring people together around inherited cultural symbols, and when they can build on or construct dense social networks and connective structures, then these episodes of contention result in sustained interactions with opponents - specifically in social movements.” (ibid: p.19)

The repercussions of social movements on politics, policies and ultimately people, can be seen in the daily enactment of political agendas whereby there is an increasing emphasis on the input and leverage of ordinary people. Once again however, one has to question the weight this opinion is given against the economic forces that prevail.

Communities are nonetheless collectively organising, formally and informally, to take on board issues of interest and / or concern to them. The forms of activity vary depending on the community, context and commitment. The Federation of Community Work Training Groups focuses on the collective approach to social change and justice which reveals a community-centred position with an advocacy role for the community sector.

*(the)* “key purpose of community development work is collectively to bring about social change and justice, by working with communities to: identify needs, opportunities, rights and responsibilities; plan, organise and take action; evaluate effectiveness and impact of the action, all in ways that challenge oppression and tackle inequalities.” (2002: p.1)

I wish to understand the ways that people become involved to effect change, and what structures and systems support this process.

The need for communities to connect on issues beyond their boundaries is highlighted by Taylor, if they hope to make effective and long-term change. The ability and resources needed to think laterally, develop networks, forge links, utilise opportunities, nurture partnerships and work creatively are features associated with networking organisations and individuals. Having identified some of the problems to making a political impact, Taylor suggests possible ways to achieve this end.

“Communities need to engage on a wider scale if they are to effect change. They need to engage with other communities, whether of locality or interest,

if they are to make a lasting difference. All this needs an effective infrastructure which can mediate difference and channel a diversity of voices into the policy process.” (2003: p.180)

I have found Taylor’s ‘Public policy in the community’ (2003) of particular relevance to this study. The analysis of new forms of governance, civil regeneration and community change opening up public arenas and political dialogue will be explored further. The possibilities of reaching alternative solutions through the realisation of opportunity and empowerment interest me. The role of community development is important based on the support, networks and bridges it builds. Crucially, it is at the border of the different sectors and actors that the policy and spaces for empowerment are actually lived. It is how these are experienced that matters and it is these aspects that this study examines.

The structural inequalities that permeate society may not be affected by recent shifts in policy and practice, and the broader factors contributing to economic, political and social exclusion continue to dominate people’s life experiences. However, there are increasing opportunities for communities to have a voice in the decision-making processes, as partners in policy-making, and playing a greater role in local governance. Despite ongoing concerns about how equal these partnerships are in practice and how representative community voices are, the political opportunities to initiate change from below nonetheless increasingly exist. Taylor highlights the potential of communities to impact on social change, provided the relevant support is in place, “...real opportunities for communities to be equal partners at the policy-making table, while the search for new forms of governance offers communities and those who work with them the opportunity to be at the cutting edge of change.” (2003: p.14).

From the government’s perspective, attempts to tackle the democratic deficit and pursue democratic renewal have established clear challenges at a national and local level. From the community perspective, the barriers to effective organisation and action have been expressed. The challenges facing both the community and statutory sectors are to address the organisational cultures inside and outside the

political system. Furthermore, the identification of effective routes to empowerment and influence need to be addressed. Taylor suggests that if change is to be sustained it must be institutionalised. If transformation is linked to an individual or charismatic leader, when they move on, their pivotal input is lost. Consequently there is a need to formalise the input of a multitude of voices so that diversity of opinion is not lost. The capacity of community representatives and professionals both need building, addressing current barriers whilst pre-empting future challenges, and with the incremental steps needed to reach long-term goals in place.

Gary Craig and Marilyn Taylor highlight the care needed when establishing partnerships between the sectors, particularly around addressing the imbalance of power in these partnerships.

“A basis for real partnership requires better information and communication between local authorities and other public agencies, and the voluntary and community sectors: early engagement in the partnership process; effective resourcing; recognition of power inequalities between partners; specific attention to the needs of black and minority ethnic and other marginalised communities; clarity about the goals of partnership; compromise where appropriate; and, most of all, a recognition of the need for organisations within the voluntary and community sectors to protect their own role and purpose.” (2002: p.142)

There is perhaps a role for intermediary bodies here, supporting this challenging process by bridging the sectors and providing an organisational, mediating and advocacy function. Challenging existing power imbalances and enhancing community empowerment, intermediaries are well positioned to facilitate community participation in decision-making.

Strategies and participatory mechanisms encouraged through decentralisation and devolution are emerging and bridging the gap linking citizens and the state. Between state-centred accountability and community-centred participation sits a possible role for bridging organisations enabling the balancing of both state responsibility and community voice. There is increasing acknowledgement of the

importance of those working on **both** sides of the equation and where state and citizen connect. Cornwall and Gaventa highlight the preconditions that would enable citizens to utilise spaces for engagement.

“...new thinking about citizenship, participation and rights raises the question of how to create new mechanisms, or spaces and places for citizen engagement. It also requires that greater attention is paid to the interface between citizens and the state, to the intermediaries who play an increasing role in bridging the gap and at processes that can enhance responsibility as well as responsiveness on all sides.” (Cornwall and Gaventa, 2001: p.32)

The government focus on strengthening civil society and the inclusion of social capital in the governance equation has implications for opportunities to experience community empowerment. Politicians and government officials now recognise the benefits as well as the economic and political sense afforded by strengthening democracy and utilising untapped social resources. Taylor emphasises the wider political considerations attached to civic regeneration.

“Politicians in particular look at these ideas to import moral cohesion, to combat dependency, to provide a sense of safety and to balance rights and responsibilities through the promotion of reciprocity.” (2003: p.49)

In summary, this review of the policy framework literature began with a look at the focus of recent government directives on community, consultation and participation, describing double devolution, citizen empowerment, the link between national prosperity and creative communities, and the restoration of political vitality (Miliband, Blears and Government White Papers). Tensions and concerns have been raised however, the loss of ‘community’ by the marginalised questioned (Taylor), and the significance of the voluntary sector and community development articulated (Hill). The process of change and transformation through consciousness raising (Tarrow), the collective approach (F.C.W.T.G.), thinking laterally, developing networks and finding alternative solutions (Taylor) are all advanced as ways to meet the challenges laid down in the current policy context.

The relevance of public policy to community empowerment clearly has significance to my thesis, establishing the framework of changing local governance and the devolution of power. The literature has revealed that political engagement and participation is taking place to varying degrees and in different ways. The literature considers how some work from inside, following traditional routes and attempting to influence from within at a lobbying and policy level. Others are identified as participating from outside the system, challenging the existing structures and systems, demonstrating alternative solidarities and solutions. Issues of access have been thrown up, along with potential channels of influence. Taylor's work has laid down some interesting and pertinent points that will be explored further, including the need for evidence that illustrates the capacity of the community and agencies to work together to bring about change.

## **Literary foundations**

This section draws together and summarise the issues and questions emerging from the literature review which will inform and be tested against my area of study. The review has identified which authors most effectively tackle the contemporary urban experiences that this research explores. I have identified which schools of thought resonate with my lines of enquiry, and which dispute my thesis. Without some understanding of the dynamics of power, the impact of economic and political forces, the implications of historical factors and the manifestations of social experiences, the comprehension of power and empowerment remain locked in polemic opposition. I am interested in making sense of the complex and nuanced experiences of power. Below, the literary themes and the emerging questions to be addressed in this research are summarised.

How power is understood by different actors and whether it gels with any of the theories expressed in the literature will be examined. Does my research sample see power as operating in global and local spaces, or is it concerned with structure and agency? Do they identify evidence of hegemony and coercion, or understand power as dynamic and reinforced through cultural reproduction? Do they experience power played out through political debate and communication, or do they focus on structural conflict and positionality? In particular, is there evidence of Foucault's analysis of power as fluid, relational and present in identity and values? Is Freire's critical consciousness and the power to transform expressed? How relevant is Taylor's policy focus to the area of study? Are there significant differences across sectors concerning traditional and non-traditional routes to power?

The shift from government to governance involves engaging with the community, addresses empowerment issues and requires the government to develop an enabling and empowering role. Are there references by research participants to theories of exclusion, structural inequality, participation and transformation in relation to empowerment opportunities? Can Taylor's understanding of power as

dynamic and evolving through experience be applied to the role professionals and intermediary organisations in enabling change?

The theories that consider influence will be related to West London's given and taken spaces. Is the literature that analyses change through insider and outsider strategies, access and agenda-setting relevant? Is there evidence of a role for collective action, participation, community development and bridging organisations as paths to empowerment?

The application of concepts concerning place will be related to West London. Are notions of space, the polarisation of rich and poor, and multiple urban realities evident in the human and spatial geography of the area of study? Do participants associate place and space to perceptions of identity, culture and London as a global city?

Globalisation links the local and the global and has implications for communities in West London. Is there evidence of Held's analysis of power as a fluid aspect of life found within and between social groups and institutions within the context of local governance and globalisation? Do the global citizens interviewed identify with Castells' analysis of global capitalism as polarising power and wealth and generating inequality? How do they perceive the effect of globalisation on the exercise and experience of power and empowerment in the local?

Analyses of community will be reviewed from the perspective of individuals who represent multifaceted and overlapping communities. Do people utilise definitions of community based on geography, interest and identity, on solidarity, conflict, similarity or difference, political concept or inequality? Has the brokering pivotal role played by front-line community workers advocating on behalf of the marginalised been identified? Is unity achieved through action and reflection, networks and pressure groups in West London? Which conception of community best embraces the complex and often contradictory experience?

The literature concerning democracy considers its role in collective decision-making, debate and citizen involvement, and how it has the potential to protect citizens as well as to marginalise and alienate them. Is there evidence of citizen action that challenges entrenched power dynamics through radical social and political transformation? What opportunities are there for democracy and community involvement in the political arena in West London? Is there evidence of the balance of power being redressed in favour of the community through (internal) government engagement initiatives and (external) support for participation by citizen involvement and politicisation? What are the mechanisms and structures of involvement? As communities dynamically restructure their identity, membership and meaning, are the challenges being understood, balanced and managed?

The policy framework is examined in relation to West London. How are the tensions created by the government policy focus on citizen consultation, participation and empowerment being met? Do actors from different sectors utilise strategies of consciousness raising, transformation, network development and the seeking of alternative solutions to meet these challenges? How does the framework of changing local governance and devolution of power affect the perspective of political engagement and participation at different levels and through different methods?

Zygmunt Bauman makes the association between the person and the political, whereby integrated communities of individuals can connect positively. This perspective is one that I examine in relation to the research area.

“If there is to be a community in the world of the individuals, it can only be (and it needs to be) a community woven together from sharing and mutual care; a community of concern and responsibility for the equal right to be human and the equal right to act on that right.” (2001: p.150)

The sense of ownership and empowerment gained through active involvement in issues and projects that make a difference to people’s life experiences provides the primary benefit of community activism, critical consciousnesses and the ability to take reformative, transformative action. For Margaret Ledwith, bell hooks, Paulo



Freire and Tom Lovett, the pursuit of equal rights and justice are at the heart of social living.

“Critical consciousness holds the power to re-view and reshape the world. The vision of transformative change is not one which creates goodies and baddies struggling against each other; it is one which believes in the innate possibility for compassion and joy in everyone and that we have been moulded in negativity by circumstance (bell hooks, 1984). In the process of liberation the oppressed will in turn liberate the oppressors (Freire, 1982), to present a new and infinitely rewarding society for all, regardless of difference. Critical consciousness is based on a wider structural analysis which is expressed in local action (Lovett et al, 1983). True democracy, in this sense, thinks globally and acts locally.” (Ledwith, 1997: p.140)

Evidence of this critical consciousness and reflexive practice is something I seek to explore through my research.

Having critically reviewed the literature concerning the issues at the centre of this thesis, they will be tested in relation to my research sample and the area of study. Drawing on the power of civil society and the strengths of community, further appreciation of how they operate needs to be examined and supported. Taylor calls for further research to identify what is needed for community change initiatives to flourish.

“We need to know more about the soil in which community change initiatives are being planted, for while a growing body of evidence has been collected on the nature of deprivation and the shortcomings of past initiatives, we still know too little about the networks and capacities within communities and their relationships with the agencies who work with them.” (2003: p.227)

This is a challenge that I have chosen to take on through this investigation into perceptions of the problems, possibilities and potentials of community power.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Research Methods**

**Insider versus outsider issues**

**Selection criteria rationale**

**Methodological choices**

**Interpretations and reflections**

**Power dynamics in research**

**Research as an empowering tool**

**Ethical issues**

**Methodology conclusions**

It is important to acknowledge that the research process itself is part of a dynamic and reflexive interaction with the socio-cultural world. Pertinent here is Seale's description of the philosophical, theoretical and political implications of making particular methodological choices. "Reflexivity of social researchers; that is, their capacity to reflect upon what they are doing, and to recognise that social research is itself a form of intervention in the social and cultural world." (1998: p.2). In line with this way of thinking, I must recognise the impact of the local and the global, the historical and the contemporary, the personal and the political, as well as cross-cultural perspectives in order to appreciate and understand the complexities of the present.

In this chapter research methodological options and rationalisation are explored, considering the balance of ethical, political, intellectual and scientific justifications. The pros and cons of different approaches to research are contemplated, explaining the rationalisation for the use of interviewing to generate detail, ethnography to provide context and multimedia methods to add depth. I also consider my position vis-a-vis the researched.

## **Researcher as insider versus outsider**

The issue of the researcher as insider or outsider is one that I have had to address. As an active member of Acton's community for some twenty years and knowing some of those involved in this study for thirty years, I have had to deal with the pressures and possible problems that this has generated, be aware of the dilemmas and manage them. Conscious of the potential of subjective criticism based on my closeness to the area of study, I have had to recognise and address the impact of this on my research throughout. I am attempting to focus on an open and transparent approach in order to ensure that practical and ethical measures are in place. Being a part of the community being studied has its positive and negative implications, as does being an outsider. However, in reflection I conclude the benefits of knowing and being known by far outweigh the disadvantages providing the challenges are addressed. I have had no problems gaining access and intimacy with the people involved in the research, both the long-standing and shorter-term relationships, in a manner that has enabled open and close exploration of the issues being examined. Location as an 'insider' has strengthened this thesis enabling excellent access to informants and yielding rich data.

The challenge of being situated with such close proximity to my subject has included the tensions where my professional role overlaps with my academic perspective, where personal relationships impinge on analytical distancing and where the subjective and objective blur. This demands a continuous vigilance and space to reflect. Mindful of Freirean analysis, critical pedagogy and the balance between knowing and being, it is clear that the location of the researcher in relation to the researched demands close attention.

Not wishing to undermine or compromise those that have contributed to this study, my position as researcher or indeed the research findings, I have endeavoured to be transparent about my location, the selection process and my relationships with the research subjects. I also acknowledge that the sample, whilst from a wide-range of backgrounds, exhibit the common feature of long-term commitment and

could therefore be seen as 'unrepresentative'. I accept that this impacts on my findings. Whilst attempting to ensure balance and range in my selection, I feel that I have achieved scope whilst there is not the balance I had set out to achieve initially. However, it is precisely the lessons that I wish to extract from these long-term experiences that I seek, in the expectation of providing useful insights into empowerment that has endured. Utilising contacts across the sectors, I actively sought out those that have 'stayed the course' in order to enrich the research and emerging theory. Equally, in part due to this continuity, participants also tend toward those that demonstrate a determined and constructive temperament. Whilst the uncertain and destructive have edited themselves out of the picture. I highlight and accept the fact that these characteristics affect my results.

The personal tension between the demands of PhD research written for an academic audience and my professional empowering role within the community development sector demanded a change in perspective. This was quickly resolved as I immersed myself in the scholastic approach, as it clearly conflicted with an academic piece where an argument is being developed and my own voice expressed. Although balancing my empowering role (as an academic, lecturer, community worker, youth worker and mother) continued to emerge throughout in that I have been drawn toward 'giving voice' to others in an egalitarian manner.

Placing the researcher at the centre of the research question is something that Creswell identifies, acknowledging the centrality of the researcher's basic position and perspective, the context, their value systems and relationships<sup>14</sup>. The inclusion of oneself in the research process is significant. We are part of the theoretical and methodological decision-making process. How we see the world and how those researched see us impacts on the research experience. Equally, the relationship between theory and research has an effect. For Silverman "Without theory, research is impossibly narrow. Without research, theory is mere armchair contemplation." (2000: p.86). Managing this balance of theory and

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<sup>14</sup> "Qualitative researchers approach their studies with a certain paradigm or world view, a basic set of beliefs or assumptions that guide their enquiries. These assumptions are related to the nature of reality (the ontology issue), the relationship of the researcher to that being researched (the epistemological issue), the role of values in a study (the axiological), and the process of research (the methodological)." (Cresswell, 1996: p.74)

practice has been an ongoing personal challenge. Wishing to provide academic neutrality to a subject that I feel personally and professionally passionate about has tested my research skills. The tension between the subjective and objective perspectives is no doubt evident; however, the richness of the results counters this pressure.

The complexity of the postmodern world in which we live with 'multiple selves and endless fragmentation of experience' is something raised by Norman Denzin (1994: p.210) as problematic for social and cultural research. No longer able or willing to objectively study and interpret a uni-dimensional social world Denzin describes a dynamic and relevant alternative approach that addresses contemporary social complexities, "a postscientific vision of locally relevant, temporary accounts, perhaps collaboratively written by researchers and those whose lives have been researched." (Seale, 1999: p.3)

There is a tendency for the people interviewed to have a community orientated approach. Again, my position has relevance here. Being a community activist in the area of study with extensive links with many of those interviewed has to be acknowledged. Furthermore, my employment with Acton Community Forum positions me closely with the community sector of Acton. Whilst I have utilised these networks to gain access, I have developed contacts from a range of different sectors. These personal, political and professional links need to be recognised as influencing the discussions, dynamics and dilemmas of this research project.

The experience of having relationships with the people comprising this research has raised issues of trust and confidentiality, of presupposition, assumed common knowledge and shared histories. I have attempted to address this by using the same format for each interview and treating each taped encounter as a unique expression of those being interviewed in recognition that it is a two-way exchange, building on the interactions and knowledge expressed. Participants checked the resulting transcripts for accuracy and acceptability, built on an understanding of mutual trust and respect. Due to my closeness to the research subjects, I have

had to be particularly aware of the ethics around confidentiality, not wishing to jeopardise their position.

Miller and Glassner describe the insider - outsider debate in relation to in-depth interviewing as a route to understanding the social world. They describe an interactionist tradition that seeks data that will provide a genuine insight into people's experiences. It also acknowledges the position of the sociologist and their relationship to the research, and have found their premise useful in approaching this research.

“All we sociologists have are stories. Some come from other people, some from us, some from our interactions with others. What matters is to understand how and where the stories are produced, which sort of stories they are, and how we can put them to honest and intelligent use in theorising about social life.” (1997: p.111)

My position relative to those researched has influenced the approach and content of this study. I am certain that revelations and expressions were forthcoming during the interview process that may otherwise not have been had I not had established relationships. As a consequence of this close proximity to my subjects, I have had to grapple with questions of discretion and honour the 'off the record' references. The result, I believe, all the richer for my closeness to the subject, although clearly the impact of this needs to be acknowledged along with the potential scope for bias.

## **Selection criteria rationale**

Employment as a community organiser gives me insight into voluntary organisations locally, as well as connections and partnerships with the statutory sector, and working within the parameters set by central government. The rationalisation behind the sample selection is based on the centrality of achieving a balanced representation. I have endeavoured to get a mix of political, cultural, environmental and social organisations. I also chose a range of different actors from the business, service and statutory sectors. I selected a mix of gender, race, faith, age, culture and area, however, it must be noted that there are less women in my sample. Although the Leader of the Council at the time was a woman, there were fewer women in positions of power. Interestingly, B.M.E.R. representation is also high in the community sector, diminishing across the sample toward the statutory and corporate sectors. Whilst highlighting the differences between members of the research sample, as mentioned earlier, I also acknowledge the fact that they share the common feature of long-term involvement in community empowerment which has the potential to skew the results.




The range of people interviewed reflects the mix of Acton's communities from the voluntary sector, the business sector, the local authority, education, the police, planning and politics. In terms of quantity, the numbers grew as I immersed myself in the research process. I was drawn to add new stories and perspectives, wanting to ensure a broad representation of Acton and its actors. With each story I was inspired to speak with more, finding the experience rewarding, fascinating and adding new dimensions. As for the focus group, five were involved in the first discussion, four in the second and five in the last. These are workable numbers, encouraging positive communication and dialogue without the problems encountered with large scale. The numbers worked well, with enough intimacy for people to contribute their personal stories in comfort, allowing for feedback and enabling a broader discussion of the themes to take place. The rationalisation behind selection of participants for the focus groups was to bring a mix of actors together from different sectors in order to facilitate discussion between potentially



diverse perspectives. There was also the practical consideration of the availability of people and coordinating suitable times. Although I would never claim to have reached a representative cross section of Acton communities, a wide variety has been interviewed and / or taken part in discussions. A common feature across the sample was a concern with tackling the challenges of living in twenty-first century Britain, and the socio-political reality of the contemporary globalised city of London.

The logic behind the selection of the respondents identified in the table (below) is based on the need to reach a wide range of actors from different sectors. Established contacts with people from different areas of concern, working and living in the sample area were approached to ascertain their willingness to participate in the research. This initial trawl was by and large successful but threw up identifiable gaps. These I sought to fill by contacting people that would meet this need. Over time, through existing and nurtured contacts, I secured commitment from representatives from various sectors and with different perspectives. Clearly, there are limitations to this approach and I am aware that a different sample would lead to different findings. However, the access afforded through professional links with the education, youth and community sectors enabled access to a wealth of potential participants. This combined with my bridging role between residents and the community sector, and, local and national government, generated access to the statutory and corporate sectors, politicians and service providers. I am aware that I could have chosen other contributors with different political perspectives or interests, but finally had to draw a line under the process, satisfied that the race, faith, gender, sectoral, political, cultural and social diversity was reached. The twenty that were selected for interview succeeded in covering the breadth of voices and range of sectors that I set out to reach.

**Table showing organisational spread**

Voluntary Community Sector	Resident's Groups & Education Sector	Second Tier & Bridging, Community Organisations	Statutory Sector	Corporate Sector, Police & Politics
Performance Poet & Activist Efia 	Acton Vale Tenants & Residents Association Jai 	Acton Community Forum Sean 	Youth Connexions & Acton Vale Community Association Sally 	Thames Valley University Anthony 
Acton Gardening Association Mathew 	South Acton Residents Action Group Khenan 	Tallo Information Centre & Somali Youth Mahamad 	Ealing Council Planning & Strategy Dillan 	Dominion Housing Sam 
Society for Afghan Residents in the UK Saabir 	Acton High School Charlotte 	Neighbourhood Renewal Earl 	Sure Start Sinéad 	Ealing Metropolitan Police Charlie 
Oaktree Playscheme Karina 	Pupil Parent Partnership Bari 	Ealing Race Equality Council Naomi 	Ealing Homes (ALMO) Donald 	Labour Party Councillor & Ealing Arab Association Ahmed 
Least Power				Most Power

**Key:**



Power



Female



Male



B.M.E.R.



White

This original research has involved one-to-one qualitative semi-structured interviews with people from the voluntary sector: a performance poet and community advocate, activists involved in the Acton Gardening Association, the Society for Afghan Residents in the U.K. and Oaktree Playscheme. From residents' associations and the education sector: South Acton Residents Action Group, Acton Vale Tenants and Residents Association, the Pupil Parent Partnership and Acton High Extended School. From the community and second-tier organisations: Acton Community Forum, the Tallo Information Centre, Neighbourhood Renewal and Ealing Race Equality Council. From the statutory sector: Youth and Connexions, Ealing Planning and Strategy, Sure Start and Ealing Homes. The final section captures people from the corporate sector, police and politicians: Thames Valley University, Dominion Housing, the Metropolitan Police and the Labour Party. There is evidence of some apparent cross-over where actors have multiple professional and personal affiliations, and are involved in more than one sector. So for instance Sally works for the local authority as a Youth and Connexions officer, but she is also vice chair of the Acton Vale Community Association. Similarly, Sam works with Dominion Housing but also chairs Ealing Community Network. Ahmed is a politician and a representative of the Ealing Arab Association. It became apparent that this characteristic was in fact common across the sample, with cross-cutting connections and a presence over different sectors.

The research question also has implications for the appropriate sampling rationale. In this instance, the need to communicate across the sectors in order to compare and contrast experiences is critical and has guided the selection process. Creswell (1996: p.118) clarifies the need for having a "purposeful sampling strategy" that selects participants using a clear criteria and rationale. This I have been mindful of as the choices made at this juncture present a crucial decision point which impacts on the direction of the research and ultimately the findings.

## **Methodological choices**

In terms of which stance to take and which methodology to pursue, I have chosen a variety of different research methods that fit the purpose of the study. As Gerson and Horowitz point out “The choice is not which method to use, but which forms the foreground and which forms the background.”<sup>15</sup> (2002: p.200). Although referring to the use of interview and observation, I argue that the position is relevant to a whole range of research techniques, choosing a variety of methods that fit my theoretical concerns and personal preferences.

I have incorporated the information gleaned through being ethnographically immersed in the field of research for an extensive period of time, together with data gathered through this involvement. I have also utilised multi-media expressions as part of the illustrative and informative background material from film, radio and photography that I have been involved in generating. I have also drawn on quantitative data to establish the context. All of this information adds texture and depth to my explorations. What follows is a discussion of the specific use of case studies, interviews and focus groups, the way I rationalise their selection and employment in this investigation.

### The qualitative approach

The researchers’ interests lie at the foundation of the selection process employed for the research techniques of collecting, recording and interpreting information. Qualitative research entails the methodological study of a wide variety of sources of data. It also involves an appreciation of the interpretive implications of the different techniques and analytical frameworks. Descriptions of social reality vary depending on one’s analytical and observational stance. Silverman (1997b: p.25)

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<sup>15</sup> “While focusing on the distinct strengths and challenges of each approach, we are the first to recognise that the relationship between observation and interviewing is intertwined and mutually supportive.” (Gerson and Horowitz, 2002: p.200)

describes this as the 'multiple logics of qualitative research which emerge from their relationships with the general purposes of research projects.'

The use of qualitative research methods complements the area of study under scrutiny here, enabling complex issues to emerge and permitting in-depth analysis to take place. Schratz and Walker suggest that qualitative methods are different in character and practice from other forms of research. They propose that these tools should be seen instead as implicit in social interaction and part of the ways we act everyday where "the worlds of academe and social life, theory and practice, work and family are not really so different but constantly interrupt one another, often in complex ways." (1995: p.2). They go on to describe the social nature of perception, and the way multiple interpretations and different readings are generated from our unique response to the same situation. The social acts of communication and comprehension mingle, "The point to note is that perception is itself social action and where both perception and communication begin and end is not easily identified." (Ibid: p.15)

Social research has the potential to interpret and reflect the complexities of social interaction and behaviour. The challenge is to do it justice. Creswell describes qualitative research in a richly tactile manner "I think metaphorically of qualitative research as an intricate fabric composed of minute threads, many colours, different textures, and various blends of material." (1998: p.13). Creswell also explains the qualitative process of constructing a study out of biographical stories set within a broader context and "evoking the presence of the author in the study" (Ibid: p.31). Whilst a multi-method, interpretative, naturalistic approach is described by Denzin and Lincoln as a relevant way to tackle qualitative research<sup>16</sup>, a variety of tools are suggested to gather empirical material ranging from visual texts to case studies, personal experience and life story, to interview and observation, the historical and the interactional.

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<sup>16</sup> "This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them, that describe the routine and problematic moments and meaning in individuals' lives." (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994: p.2)

The research methods employed here were chosen in order to allow the qualitative exploration of the theme of power and empowerment through the voices and discussions of diverse actors in various settings and with different roles. For this reason, a multi-faceted approach has been undertaken in an effort to discover depth, meaning and relevance to the research focus on community power.

### Qualitative interviewing

As a research tool, interviewing enables the collection of data in a face-to-face setting, using the same questions in a semi-structured way for all respondents and allowing conversation to arise about issues in a discursive style. As a method of investigation interviewing generates empirical data about the social world through dialogue and people sharing information about their lives. Data gathered can be used to reveal things beyond the interview situation. It also enables an understanding of the person and their narrative revealing individual and structural characteristics. In order to ascertain detailed reflections and personal stories regarding community empowerment, the qualitative interview permits direct access to the voices of activists. My thesis requires key data around personal motivations and experiences of power that it is only possible to reach through qualitative interviewing.

The act of interviewing as a research tool is based on the assumption that conversation will generate knowledge about the social. Asking people to talk, interpreting their words and constructing knowledge are the basic elements. Nonverbal communication also plays a role, inferring significance from expressed emotions and action, as well as how and what is said. For this reason I filmed<sup>17</sup> the interviews which enabled the review and deeper analysis of meaning. Social actors' interpretations of their world can be complex, but the qualitative approach offers a means to interpret and translate their narrative. Lawler positions the storyteller central to comprehension of the social.

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<sup>17</sup> The use of multimedia research techniques will be explained later in the chapter.

“If you want to find out how people make identities, make sense of the world and of their place within it - if we want to find out how they interpret the world and themselves – we will have to attend to the stories they tell.” (2002: p.255)

Interviews form the dominant research method utilised in this study. The technique affords the opportunity to explore issues and ideas through dynamic discussion and expression. The wealth of material generated through this method, together with the broad range of voices heard, has given me an enormous amount of valuable material to work with in the formulation of my thesis.

Some twenty one-to-one interviews took place over a year between June 2005 and May 2006, in settings chosen by those being interviewed. A further twenty-five interviews with community activists<sup>18</sup> has also informed this research. Fourteen of these participants also engaged in the focus groups. A total of fifty-nine in-depth discussions have informed this research. The interviews varied in length, between forty-five and ninety minutes. The person being interviewed, our relationship, the setting, time constraints and language barriers influenced the duration of the interview and the complexity of our discussions.

For some the issue of being interviewed, filmed and photographed as an individual was problematic, as they didn't want to be identified as any more important than others within the organisation. There was a sense that this would go against the collective principles on which the organisation was established. In one case this manifested itself in my interviewing three members of the organisation at once, as they felt this fitted better with their principles.

Interviews took place in a variety of different settings, from people's homes, to council offices, community centres, the police station, educational establishments and business premises. I left the choice of venue in the hands of those being interviewed, and this was influenced by our relationship, the amount of time

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<sup>18</sup> Research undertaken at the Centre for Urban and Community Research, Goldsmiths, University of London, for my M.A. in Culture, Globalisation and the City dissertation in 2003, and reanalysed for the purposes of this thesis.

available and access to an environment where we would have relative peace. The choice of venue clearly impacted on the nature of the interview, and needs to be accounted for. The most intimate was held with a long-standing friend and colleague over a glass of wine in her home. Whilst two of the most stressful took place as follows: one in a small glass meeting room in the heart of the council head quarters (rooms designed for transparency in all senses of the word); the other in an office where despite meeting 'out of hours', there were constant interruptions. I took note of these factors when writing up the interviews and referenced the impact of this on my analysis.

Research I undertook on community activism in Acton<sup>19</sup> in 2003 has been reanalysed. It reached an extensive range of primary community organisations, with twenty-five people directly involved with numerous organisational affiliations (123 in all). These groups ranged from resident action groups, the local history society, cultural organisations, faith communities, supplementary and specialist schools, arts and community associations. I reviewed the data I had collected in these interviews and gathered information pertinent to community empowerment.

The stories emerging from the qualitative interviews form the foundation of this research, and the significance of the selection process remains a key factor in the analysis of information relating to community empowerment across the sectors. The use of qualitative interviewing and the examination of content have generated a wealth of data on which to build my thesis. With interviewing, attention is focused on individual biographies and personal responses to the questions posed. This information becomes the lens through which the social world is understood, forming the foundation on which theory is built. These theoretical conclusions gathered through the interview process symbolise a bigger picture, such that "Individual lives are seemed to embody larger structural and cultural formations." (Gerson and Horowitz, 2002: p.215). It is the ability to look at the individual stories and to draw significant meaning concerning society at large that I aim to achieve. My research question concerning activists' motivations, perspectives and experiences requires access that can be achieved through the qualitative interview.

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<sup>19</sup> M.A. dissertation entitled 'Voices of the People: An exploration of Community Activism in Acton.' (R. E. Pepper, 2003)



What this method lacks is the wider social context, and it is for this reason that I also employ ethnography in order to fill in the gaps in my data.

### Ethnography

The added complexity revealed through ethnography serves to enrich and deepen comprehension. Where qualitative interviews expose the detail and are central to my thesis, ethnography provides the wider social context of the city, the places and spaces of community, and the environment of the actors that informs the research. Ethnography helps to situate the urban actors' experiences within a broader perspective. Here I shall look at the strengths and weaknesses of ethnography.

The ethnographic process is fraught with problematic questions of authenticity and truth-claims, debates around subjectivity and the objective view, the role of the researcher and the researched, questions of the perceived and real. Historically, the use of participant observation, the research interview and the written testimony have served as the backbone of the qualitative research process, supplemented by quantitative surveys, statistical analyses and data outputs. Problems of uni-dimensional representation could be a potential flaw to such a method when approaching constructed ethnoscares, and I would argue that multi-media research provides a richer picture of the perceived territories and symbolic landscapes. The complex array of diverse stories revealed in any ethnographic process throws up analytical challenges for the researcher in order to elicit meaning. Rosaldo explains that the analysis of narrative doesn't fit into a "unified master summation".

"Taking account of subordinate forms of knowledge provides an opportunity to learn and productively change 'our' forms of social analysis. It should broaden, complicate, and perhaps revise, but in no way inhibit, 'our' own ethical, political, and analytical insights." (1989: p.147)

Traditional forms of researching and interpreting the world serve a useful purpose by laying down baseline data. However, the range of information gathered from

symbolic narratives demands innovative research tools. With time and a creative interpretation of research methodology, alternative, dynamic and interactive methods have been used to interpret the world, and in some cases, handing over the control of knowledge and truth to those previously only the subject of others' gaze, enquiry and research. By doing this, it may be possible to come closer to an understanding of the complex nature of the lived spaces and the real issues impacting upon urban realities. According to Lefebvre,

"The fields we are concerned with are, first, the **physical** - nature, the Cosmos; secondly, the **mental**, including logical and formal abstractions; and thirdly, the **social**. In other words, we are concerned with logico-epistemological space, the space of social practice, the space occupied by sensory phenomena, including products of the imagination such as projects and projections, symbols and utopias." (1974: p.11)

The cityscape and image-scape is understood, dissected and described by city dwellers and researchers alike. Interpretation of space is not just an academic pursuit, as experiencing the neighbourhood is something in which we all partake. Spaces of identity formation and expression are relative and contextual. Representation of the self in terms of culture, gender, class, faith and race find expression through coded identifications and statements of self. These expressions of identity are strongly associated with territoriality and connectivity to place. Cultural associations are coded and emanate from a sense of being and knowing, which are intimately linked to power and politics.

Ethnographic research has been used in an attempt to analyse the city, its inhabitants and their problems, in an effort to impact upon policy, planning and practice. However, to get to the heart of the matter and unravel the complex dynamics at play, a methodology that is open, reflexive and enabling dialogue is needed. This has the potential of leading to the generation of meaningful results. Only then will informed practice be possible and constructive communication attained.

The ethnographic approach involves data collection through participant observation and interview. It produces detailed accounts of how people live their lives. Ethnography is descriptive and tells a story, using narrative and exploring cultural themes. It is concerned with dialogue that is subsequently portrayed and interpreted, as expressed by Smith, "Description commits an invisible mediation...Ethnographic work is explicitly a dialogue." (2002: p.20)

As a cultural and social research tool, ethnography is qualitative in character and builds on trusting relationships. Walsh describes the dangers of exploitation, manipulation and the breaching of trust that are possible with ethnographic research. He goes on however to describe its positive benefits: "Yet ethnography, through participant observation of the social and cultural worlds, opens out the possibility of an understanding of reality which no other method can realise." (1998: p.232). The researcher needs to address these ethical issues of trust and responsibility, particularly where there is such close proximity with the researched.

Ethnography in its purest form has not been undertaken here, instead I have utilised the experience of immersion in the area of study as an ethnographic experience that informs the research process. I have analysed open meetings and thematic debates undertaken as part of my development work in the community. This provides a broad and inclusive perspective on community concerns, policy priorities, active citizenship, different sector perspectives and issue-based activism and interests. Extensive exposure to a variety of different public meetings, forums and networks over a number of years has enriched the research process. It also provides an insight into the power dynamics exerted in these forums, within and between communities of interest. These I make general reference to in my reasoning and provide supplementary support material to the discussion.

Participant observation offers the opportunity to document the everyday activity of society and sub-societies. The question of representation is significant to this method however (Sanchez-Jankowski, 2002: p.144). One needs to be mindful of who is speaking on behalf of whom. When using observation as a technique, the

researcher has to absorb meaning. Dingwall describes this “In observation, we have no choice but to listen to what the world is telling us.” (1997: p.64).

My long-standing, broad-ranging experience of community activity within the research area has also played a part in my research methodology. I have drawn on this experience as a backdrop for the exploration and analysis of the voices of Acton activists and professionals. I have had access to actors from a variety of different sectors through my working relationships. My first and second-hand knowledge of local issues, organisations and motivations has influenced the exploration of themes and content. As mentioned earlier, it must be noted that my own position also opens up questions of bias which have been confronted. This I have done by acknowledging potential prejudice, through transparency and by utilising rigorous research methods. As an approach and despite its limitations, ethnography has the potential to add depth and meaning to research and is integral to the approach and understanding of this thesis' area of focus.

### Participatory research

Situating participatory research techniques in this study is a significant aspect of the decisions around the chosen methods. Participatory and action research are entirely led by the community, who identify the issues requiring examination, develop the research approach, direct the research process and its analysis. Clearly, balancing the PhD requirements alongside the commitment to an emancipatory approach, this research attempts to utilise the principles of participatory research whilst acknowledging its academic nature.

In line with an empowering approach, the research process lay as much as possible in the hands of those taking part in the study in terms of preferred location, conversational direction and opportunities for active participation. Once the interviews had been transcribed, participants were asked to review, correct and edit their stories, ensuring an on-going, dynamic process of interaction and ownership. Continued discussion and dialogue have been maintained throughout

the research journey, offering opportunities for further input and influence, and participants have been given the opportunity to read and comment on the final thesis.

The focus group<sup>20</sup> is a further space to feedback the emerging findings, enable ongoing participant involvement and take discussions to another level. Here, the original research participants met one another and discussed empowerment from their different perspectives. The dynamic, dialogic nature of the focus group enables re-engagement with and between participants, and provides a forum for further in-depth debate, picking up on the key findings, gauging responses and developing ideas. In this way the participants have several key points to input and engage with the research.

### Multi-media research approaches

Whilst qualitative interviewing and ethnography form the key research techniques utilised in this research, additional depth has been achieved by the incorporation of multi-media approaches. These techniques have the capacity to produce a wealth of information including visual, audio, oral and 'artefactual'. A combination of methods of information gathering has the potential to provide a fuller view of the area of concern. A multi-disciplinary, multi-dimensional approach to research also has the capacity to empower those 'being researched', placing them at the centre of editorial control and in a position of power. According to Keith and Cross (1993: p.4) "...it is important to emphasise that theory... is always learning from the experiences of real people, rather than lecturing about them." A variety of multi-dimensional techniques can be employed that enable self-representation and has the additional bonus of self-reflexivity and humility of the researcher vis-à-vis the researched. Where qualitative interviews provide the detail, ethnography the context, multi-media contributes depth.

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<sup>20</sup> Focus groups will be discussed in more depth shortly.

The depth of information gathered from a multi-media research approach and the variety of formats employed throws up a huge body of work and content, which then needs interpretation and analysis if it is to be used as a catalyst for greater understanding. This in itself is potentially difficult when using creative and innovative forms of research, but a challenge worth rising to in order to reap its benefits. Analysis needs also to take on board the bias / position of the researched, the researcher, the commissioning body and the intended audience. Pink highlights the “influence of theoretical beliefs, disciplinary agendas, personal experience, gendered identities and different visual cultures” of ethnographers<sup>21</sup>.

As part of this research I have analysed the content of short films commissioned by the organisation I work with, including ‘Faces of Acton’ a film created by young people and capturing the views of others about Acton. The film has informed this research and depicts representations of the mental and physical landscapes of Acton. Other visual evidence in the form of locally created community perspectives in video and photography has also added depth to the artefactual evidence base. I also draw upon the community hour broadcast on Westside Radio presented weekly by Acton Community Forum, an opportunity to interview and explore ideas around community action with organisational representatives. The film, photography and radio expressions have been utilised and incorporated into the depth of expression and meaning sought. The multi-media approach offers up the potential of freedom of expression, which in a more confined research style would remain lost and unexplored. A variety of different approaches to gathering information and portraying experience allow for richer array of information to be gathered, leading to a fuller exploration and analysis.

Hearing the actual voices of those whose stories are being told provides the occasion for the peoples’ own account to be heard, rather than translated and ascribed meaning. Although the choice of prompting questions, together with the editing process, directs power into the hands of the film-maker, if the film is created by the people themselves, with control over the process, then this is as close as

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<sup>21</sup> “Fundamental to understanding the significance of the visual in ethnographic work is a reflexive appreciation of how such elements combine to produce visual meanings and ethnographic knowledge.” (Pink, 2001: p.29)

you can get to an 'authentic voice'. Pink (2001: p.93) seeks practical solutions to the possible bias in representations by suggesting that "the development of collaborative approaches to the production and interpretation of video images" helps to balance controlling forces in the production of information. The use of video as a research tool has been employed to enhance my appreciation of the expression and communication. It has enabled the reviewing and revisiting of the verbal and social interactions of the interviews and focus groups, and is a useful and expressive research method.

Each of the interviews was filmed, with approval sought and gained prior in advance. This was done for a number of reasons, firstly, as a research tool enabling all visual and verbal exchanges to be recorded. Later, having the video record enabled the transcripts to capture word, nuance and reference. This I revisited periodically to re-engage with the experience and content. The footage also revealed the dynamics between myself and those interviewed, demonstrating body language and other non-verbal exchanges, as the camera was focused on both parties. The implications emanating from this interplay will be elaborated on in the analysis of my findings.

The problems encountered with this method included my role as interviewer, wishing to put my subject at ease whilst at the same time setting up the filming equipment. This had the potential to create the opposite effect initially, particularly with the inevitable technical hitches. One interview generated footage that slipped out of focus part way through, never to regain visual clarity for instance. Another interview was cut short as the tape ran out. Despite these limitations people very quickly forgot the presence of the camera, set at a suitable distance. All in all, film proved a positive way of capturing the different layers of communication, bringing the stories alive and enabling thorough analysis.

The use of film was revealing in many ways. The study of narrative when transcribing the videotaped interviews requires a particular kind of alertness and ability to capture the essence of what is being communicated. Audible distractions, accents, phrasing and assumption, as well as the visual and physical

communications, all impact on the complex interchange of ideas and information. Potter describes the examination of conversation as "Developing skills in such analysis is best characterised as developing a particular mentality rather than following a performed recipe." (1997: p.158). Furthermore, there were instances when I needed to return to the footage to pick up greater clarity and detail that resonated with the emerging issues and themes. The footage served me well as a record of the interviews and to illuminate dynamics and issues.

I have also used photography in this research, analytically and potentially illustratively. I photographed all of the people interviewed as a further way of enriching the research experience. Some photographs are portrait style whilst others capture the person involved in activity that characterises their work in some way. These images I referred to and used to support my reflections around community action. For me, the visual language speaks volumes and photography is a big part of my life: artistically, as a visual tool and in terms of documentary.

Schatz and Walker (1995: p.72) describe the "curious neglect of the visual imagination" in the social sciences. This tendency is explained by a century of quantitative focus that has eclipsed anything pictorial in nature. Schatz and Walker (Ibid: p.73) see the photographer in the same light as the ethnographer as "a trusted witness" able to capture memory, reconstruct history and with the power to represent events and people in the present, having a quality which "gives them a particular power when used in social research for they allow us to represent events to people as if they were still happening." (Ibid: p.76). Photography has a power that words frequently lack, bringing action and interpretation together through their evocative quality. The visual medium allows the viewer to see that which is 'invisible' by bringing the person, situation and activity to life (if only two dimensionally). I utilised photography as data to be analysed, freezing the action and capturing aspects of the people participating in the research, a snap shot of Acton activists.

The ways I planned and actually utilised multi-media research methods shifted however. My initial idea was to include photography and film as part of the thesis



submission, with photographic illustrations and plans for a short film of key conversations concerning empowerment. Over time, I felt that this would compromise the contributors' anonymity and although I received permission I elected not to include these elements. Instead, multi-media approaches have contributed to my appreciation, review and analysis of the data.

An exploration of the lived and conceived realities through inventive research methods can be a useful interpretive tool in the exploration of the urban experience of power. This interpretation of our world, the real and imagined, is a necessary part of a conscious understanding of our reality. The plotting of the perceptions and experiences of power within the urban setting can usefully be demonstrated through expressive research tools. The following sections look at the details of other techniques employed in this research, such as case studies and focus groups.

### Case studies

In order to add further layers of meaning I have employed the use of case studies. I selected four people and looked in more depth at their stories. Case studies have the following characteristics and structure according to Creswell (1996: p.186) such that the reader develops a feel for the context and setting. Located within a unique timeframe and location enables an understanding of the background and surrounding issues. This allows an appreciation of the experiences of the subject, raises awareness of the complexity of the case and generates an in-depth picture by using multiple sources of information in data collection.

The case study approach has pros and cons associated with it. Limitations include the fact that it inevitably remains a partial picture of the person's story, the content influenced by the questions posed and the areas of elaboration selected. Invariably this incomplete and potentially biased picture does not do justice to the whole person and their history. The strength of the case study is the depth of insight offered by this method, however. Despite its limitations, it nonetheless

offers detail and depth, background and context. By using this technique, I would argue that I have been able to develop a greater understanding of the relevance of individual histories, influences and issues.

The people chosen as case studies reflect the multicultural nature of London experienced as a global city. They were born outside the U.K., in Somalia, Canada, Lebanon and Jamaica. The samples' ages range from thirties to sixties, and all are committed activists who work in different fields representing different sectors, one is a community activist, another represents a bridging organisation, another is a council officer and the last is a politician. I have chosen a mix of ethnicity, gender, age, faith, employment, sector and focus in order to enable the exploration of their histories and to provide greater insight into their motivations, value systems and experiences. I undertook further discussions with the case study participants, where their stories were explored in greater depth and the context surrounding them explored in more detail. This interaction has permitted a closer examination of their stories through time and space than the other participants, and has to some degree impacted on the centrality of their input<sup>22</sup>. The opportunity to understand these four individuals in more depth enhances the analysis of their empowerment journeys.

### Focus groups

Group discussion affords a range of different voices the opportunity to elaborate and discuss a topic further. The point of holding focus groups is to enable dynamic group discussion amongst several people around the chosen theme. Payne and Payne (2004: p.103) suggest that it be comprised of people of equal status and concentrating on a narrowly focused topic.

There are strengths and weaknesses associated with holding a focus group. The method can be problematic in terms of selecting candidates that will work as a

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<sup>22</sup> The contributions of those that are case studies: Mahamad, Sally, Ahmed and Khenan, have each made considerable input into the richness of the research.

group. Compatibility, personality, beliefs, political stance need to be considered. Selecting a venue that is neutral to all participants is also significant but can be problematic, as well as finding a time that is mutually convenient. Choosing the optimum number of participants is important in order to enable freedom of speech whilst avoiding domination by some and passivity of others. The direction in which the conversation evolves is dynamic and as such can veer off the chosen topic. These are some of the effects of creating an environment within which the members have the power to influence content, direction, atmosphere and outcome.

Interestingly, the strengths of the focus group are in fact the antithesis of its weaknesses, in that its very organic nature and content can generate interesting and original interpretations and expressions. The participants can feed off each other's energy and the conversation can evolve in unexpected ways as the group members divulge aspects that may not have emerged through a one-dimensional expression or limited dialogue.

One focus group brought five seasoned Acton individuals together from a wide range of backgrounds (Irish, Caribbean, Arab, Somali and Liverpudlian) and all highly motivated in their work, their beliefs and actions, and from different areas of specialism (education, politics, refugee rights, social work, culture). This produced some interesting debate and touched on some insightful revelations. The setting was a local social café that was neutral ground, comfortable, accessible, informal and was booked after-hours. The members were predominantly known to one another and were relaxed in each other's company. Despite the great differences between them in terms of ethnicity and background, there was a commonality of basic egalitarian principles. This I must mention as it was a conscious decision to bring together a mix of people who would also connect. I made a choice to focus on a constructive exchange between like-minded individuals.

A second and third focus group brought together a further nine people to take forward the discussions around power and empowerment, developing the discussions in the light of the emerging findings. These participants were chosen from those who took part in the earlier one-to-one interviews, including the four

case-studies. The selection of participants was intended to gather people with cross-sectoral experiences of community empowerment in order to enrich the debate, look into changes in opinion and enable a dynamic discussion between individuals from different perspectives. These focus groups took place towards the end of the research in the late summer of 2008 at community venues that provided a neutral and informal environment. I enlisted the support of a colleague to take notes, and filmed the proceedings. The focus group format provides a useful opportunity to feedback findings and enlivens the debate by bringing key contributors together with the sole aim of dynamically exploring the research question more deeply.

The opportunity to debate the findings with those who had originally contributed to the research was received positively. This was the first time participants could discuss the overall findings and identify where their own contributions sat. Previously they had seen and commented on their own interview transcripts, but the focus group provided a forum to critique the research as a whole. A summary of the findings was given to participants in advance of the focus group so that they had time to consider the content, reflect and identify any areas they wished to explore further. Although some participants knew one another, the sessions began with introductions and a brief description of their different roles, focus and areas of interest. There followed an overview of the research question and preliminary findings. Debate ensued, with existing data explored and new material emerging. The dynamics between group members and the development of ideas through open dialogue generated further examples of the ways community empowerment was limited or enriched. The comparison of different experiences and illustrations from diverse participants generated further data to be analysed and incorporated into the research findings.

## Interpretations and reflections

Having gathered information, transcribed interviews and collected data, the process of analysis and interpretation can begin. This practice requires consciousness and consideration as much as the other elements of the methodological process. The ethnographic experience for the talkers, the writers, the viewers and the readers of research carry different interpretative qualities. Recognition of the multitude of voices needs to be taken into consideration throughout the research process so that the complexities of the interplay between the real and conceived can be understood and made sense of. The question of 'multi-vocality' is examined by Pink.

"This diversity of worldviews, narratives and understanding of reality that ethnographers encounter during fieldwork therefore forms the basis of ethnographic knowledge, and some would argue that it should be represented without 'translating' these 'local voices' into 'authoritative voice' of social science. During the 1990's several scholars began to consider how the 'many voices', or 'multivocality', of ethnographic experience can be integrated into the design of ethnographic representations." (2001: p.117)

This is an area I struggled with as I found my role (personally, professionally and academically) has been concerned with empowering others, and giving others voice<sup>23</sup>. In this way, my temptation throughout has been to provide a platform for others to express their stories. This led to a tension whereby I was drawn through egalitarian principles and practice to give equal expression to each participant's view, when selective illustrations would suffice and when a thesis also demands that I find and assert my own voice.

The process from interview to analysis and interpretation is one that also relies on the researcher listening and observing both the speech and actions of the respondent, drawing out the concerns that they identify as important and developing one's own conclusions. For Strauss and Corbin this will lead to a focus for the research project, not the other way around. "...analysis should lead him to

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<sup>23</sup> A tension mentioned earlier.

discover the issues that are important or problematic in the respondents' lives." (1998: p.38). They go on to stress the value of recognising one's own and the respondents' biases that may impact on our thinking and interpretation. This they suggest can be overcome by moving beyond these influences.

Interviews are analysed as descriptions and representations of reality. The analysis of these reports requires systematic coding and summarising of the descriptions, and creating an organising framework that captures and describes the social world portrayed by respondents. Holstein and Gubrium explain the ways in which interview data is deconstructed and reconstructed<sup>24</sup>. The analysis of the linguistic and social content of discourse is an element of the research act. Back describes the need to utilise this approach to express research findings, translating them into accessible forms<sup>25</sup>.

Watson points out the influence of the sociologist such that data, practice and analysis are shaped by the ways text is actively used and interpreted. Both writing and reading are not passive. Instead they are dynamic, interpretative acts. "Texts are active rather than inert in that they predispose readers to a given interpretation of a text." (1997: p.95)

Examination of the data and research findings needs an open, critical and reflexive approach. Revealing 'the truth' involves a value judgment as well as a leap of faith. But discourse analysis may better be described as a route to uncovering different 'truths', different stories. Tonkiss<sup>26</sup> shows how this approach unearths diverse 'truths'.

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<sup>24</sup> "The analyst's reports do not summarise and organise what interview participants have said, as much as they 'deconstruct' participants' talk to show the reader both the how's and the what's of the narrative dramas conveyed, which increasingly mirrors an interview society." (Holstein and Gubrium in Silverman, 1997: p.127)

<sup>25</sup> "The literary turn in the social sciences offers us fresh insights into the textual dimensions of social investigation. We must seek to turn these insights into useful tools, whereby we can think again about the way in which we express and disseminate our ideas and findings. Developing the rhetoric of writing will help researcher's find new ways of intervening within public life and may enable us to reach wider audiences in a more effective way." (Back in Seale, 1998: p.296)

<sup>26</sup> "...the analyst is concerned not so much with getting at the truth of an underlying social reality through discourse, but with examining the way that language is used to present different 'pictures' of reality." (Tonkiss, 1998: p.249)

Silverman (2001: p.92) describes the techniques of conversation and dialogue analysis, emphasising this analytical approach as data driven, seeking patterns, characterisation and meaning. I have elected not to undertake this rigorous method in my research. Rather, I have explored the content and exchanges in order to understand the essential themes and ideas emerging through enquiry and conversation.

The analysis of data involves immersion in the information initially. The process of methodically transcribing every interview, word-for-word, became a tantric-like ritual whereby I reconnected with the interview experience by replaying the footage and capturing the verbal and visual expressions. In this way I became fully engaged in the content and character of the experience.

I went on to use the Nvivo research analysis computer programme to aid in clustering thematic areas of content. Reviewing each of the interview transcripts and analysing the narrative for emerging themes, I coded the content. I categorised the most commonly referenced points, as well as identifying unique elements, in this way building a picture of similarities and differences across the research sample. This proved an interesting process as unexpected insights emerged through the close examination of the narrative content. Having identified common ground and differences within and between my interview sample population I was able to proceed to an examination of the emerging patterns and findings. This proved an important point as it revealed unexpected findings and shaped the development of my thesis.

The approach taken to analysing the data generated during the interviews was time consuming but thorough. I was able to understand the content and immerse myself in the text, cross reference and cluster similarities and differences. In this way, I have been able to draw out the key findings in a meaningful way, giving voice to the people interviewed, doing justice to the emerging themes and finding my own interpretive voice.

Reflexivity is an important research tool throughout, including at the analysis phase. I have endeavoured to practice reflexivity in my practice, as a way to keep in tune with the process, gain insight from the research experience and relate my findings to reality. Skeggs describes how the reflexive self can be incorporated into the research process.

“...there is a significant difference between being reflexive and accruing reflexivity to oneself through a process of attachment and as a cultural resource to authorise the self and doing reflexivity: building sensitivity into research design and paying attention to practice, power and process.”  
(2002: p.368)

Creswell (1996) identifies a set of standards that can be used to ensure that the ‘quality’ is present in the qualitative approach, such that there is commitment “...to emergent relations with respondents, to a set of stances and to a vision of research that enables and promotes justice.” The standards recommended include heightened self-awareness and creating personal and social transformation in the critically subjective research process. Another suggestion is reciprocity between the researcher and the researched involving trust and mutuality. Creswell shows that giving voice to alternative views is needed, rather than marginalising, disengaging and silencing. He also feels that the researcher should respect the responsibility to turn research into action. Clarifying a set of guiding principles that lay down best practice in terms of approach, responsibilities and perspective is a useful framework from which to begin, complete and follow up the research process.

Analysing, interpreting and writing-up one’s research inevitably and invariably involves some generalisation. Williams (2002: p.138) highlights the fact that in research the balance between art and science is fine and recommends a methodological pluralism. The role of interpretation and reflection is crucial to the meaningful analysis of the findings generated through the research process and an element that requires adequate time dedicated to it.



## Verification

The process of verifying research is one that can empower the researched and ensure that the end result stands up to scrutiny. Creswell (1996: p.201) has put forward a number of procedural checks that are designed to support this process and include prolonged field observation, the building of trust and cultural sensitivity, using multiple sources, peer review and external checks, refining the working hypothesis as the enquiry progresses, clarifying the researcher's assumptions and biases from the outset, and returning to the respondents for their views on the findings and interpretations. These methods and checks have informed the research approach and processes pursued here, and have been adhered to throughout.

The lived experience of the individuals and communities found within the city reveal a complex array of realities and narratives around urban life that are not usually reflected or exposed in the uni-dimensional accounts of a place. This research attempts to include and reflect upon multiple voices and realities, and draw out similarities and differences between the diverse urban players. It also involves the active participation and verification by those involved, including the reflexivity of the researched and researcher. The remainder of this chapter will explore the broader philosophical deliberations impacting on methodological considerations.

## Intellectual justification

The need to submerge myself in this investigation and intellectually defend the reasons for selecting a particular methodological approach is essential to the direction, content and rationale of the study. Ethical and political justification needs to be considered and balanced, as do intellectual and scientific validation in order to do justice to the subject and to generate a rigorous piece of research.

The choice of a research method that argues for and demonstrates an empowering and egalitarian approach is central. Another consideration is the methodological suitability to the particular context and research content. This research seeks to undertake an empirically rich study of social actors' perceptions of empowerment. The challenge is to do justice to the subject whilst meaningfully engaging with relevant and appropriate social research methodology. Bent Flyvbjerg's book addresses this tension by successfully bringing together theory and social research through the lens of issues of power and democracy.

“...the strategies-and-tactics view of power is employed in a study of contemporary affairs using social science research methodology. Despite differences in time perspective, substance, and methodology, this study shares with Nietzsche's and Foucault's approaches a view of power as productive and positive and not only as restrictive and negative... The central question, in addition to who has power and why they have it, is how power is exercised. Power is studied with a point of departure in small questions, 'flat and empirical.' In Foucault's words, instead of based on 'big questions.' The Great is found in the Small as mentioned above. Most important – and this I take to be the main contribution of Nietzsche and Foucault to the study of power and modernity – knowledge and power, truth and power, rationality and power are seen as analytically and politically inseparable, leaving the actual relationship between these phenomena open to empirical test.” (1998: p.5)

This is the point at which the research topic and methods come together around the notion of power.

## **Power dynamics in research**

This section examines research in relation to the dynamics of power, political perspectives and social theory. The role of power within the research process should be accounted for and addressed, and is of particular pertinence to this research based as it is on the subject of power. For McKie this dynamic is expressed as “Power in social research is not a fixed and unitary construct and the realities of the shifting nature of powers however evident...” (2002: p.282). Power relationships within research have a number of repercussions which need to be taken on board. The issues relevant to this research include the implications of power differentials and the need for a politics of reflexivity in different settings. For example community-based researchers require an appreciation of the multiple definitions of community / communities and the power differentials that exist there. This can be addressed by highlighting local issues and structures through a broad perspective that acknowledges historical legacies, community life and institutional structures. Furthermore, the role of subjectivity should be acknowledged when assessing the findings and grounding assertions in evidence and reflection. These aspects should be considered if an appreciation of the dynamics of power within the research process is to be addressed.

Analysis of the wider implications of the research project needs to recognise the unequal forces at play in any given situation. The social research interview process can potentially be seen as an unequal exchange between the ‘powerful researcher’ and the ‘powerless research participant’ (Katz, 2002a: p.300). From this perspective the flow of power is seen to be constructed as unitary and one-directional, negating the complex and multiple perceptions and experiences of power. For Reynolds the nature of power within the research process is explained as contextual, interactional and transitory.

“I suggest that structural divisions in society, such as race and gender divisions, and in particular the differing class, race and gender status of the researcher and research participant directly influences power relations in this research relationship.” (2002a: p.300)

However, Reynolds goes on to describe the constant movement of power between the researcher and the researched as they occupy different positions of power and authority during the dynamic interview process. The researcher may set the terms of reference such as the design, implementation and final reporting. Whilst the respondent exerts power through actively selecting the information they choose to make available to the researcher.

Our perception of the world we live in, the ways we construct our opinions and the methods we choose to ascertain our respondents' views are not neutral. They form part of our particular social and cultural orientation. This affects the research question itself, the methods employed as well as the topics raised. Bowler (1997: p.76) identifies the need for sensitivity during the research process that takes on board cultural differences<sup>27</sup>.

Research is a socio-political activity, where "Its concern is not simply to say why the world is as it is but to provide us with space to think how it could be different." (Schatz and Walker, 1995: p.125). Research practice and theory are interrelated. Positioning the researcher inside the body of their research is a way to relate social theory to the real world (Ibid: p. 118). Research is a means to see the world differently, such that theory can give intent and meaning to action, and expand our capacity to identify and find alternatives.

The relevance of research has been debated, in particular the extent to which it generates truth and its scope to instigate change. Research quality should be judged in terms of its political effect and the achievement of political goals, rather than simply unearthing objective truth according to the Marxist and Feminist perspectives where its capacity to empower and emancipate is seen as the mark of success. Schwandt identifies the connection between the research process, communicating findings and struggle.

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<sup>27</sup> "There is a continuing need to develop culturally sensitive approaches." (Bowler)

“...action research attempts an interactive cycle between practical struggles, the formation of research questions and the reporting of research findings in a way that informs further practical struggle,” (1996: p.10).

Research has the potential to generate knowledge, inform decision-making and trigger change. It can also address and influence social problems. For Bloor this happens at the grassroots level of sociological research.

“...the real opportunities for sociological influence lie in closer to the coalface than they do to head office, that the real opportunities for sociological influence lie in relations with practitioners, not with the managers of practice.” (ibid: p.234)

Bloor describes the power relations found in the research process inherent in all relationships. He argues that sociology should not be supporting the expansion of power but rather supporting challenges to it.

“The opposite of power is not its absence, but the resistance it provokes; sociologists, so the argument goes, should be laying the groundwork for citizen resistance rather than fostering the extension and effectiveness of expert power.” (ibid: p.234)

Disagreement about whether or not social research should be political or neutral continues, and indeed whether it **can** be neutral. From one perspective it is argued that research should be explicitly political and participatory, affiliating with political goals whilst combating patriarchy, racism and other forms of discrimination. The other position suggests that all knowledge is socially constructed and therefore no policy prescription can be presented. My conclusion is that sociologists are well placed to address social problems. Research has the potential to influence practice by impacting on both the research subjects and the research findings' wider audience. Research can make sense of the socio-political domain by constructing, contesting and changing our perception and experience of social reality.

The methodological stance taken involves questions around our relationship with theory, process, evaluation and analysis. Fortier describes this entangled process as "...conceiving ways of thinking the social through ourselves." (1998: p.56). Context needs to be taken on board such that research can be undertaken with a view to reinforce or challenge the political, social and moral norms of the time in which it is conducted.

By way of a challenge to the research community, Silverman invites those undertaking sociological research to do so with creativity and rigor. In order to enliven the debate and bring fresh insights, Silverman asks for professionalism and vision.

"We owe it to our audiences to surprise them by inviting them, with great clarity to look anew at the world they already know. And we owe it to ourselves to respect the discipline (in both senses) as well as the power of social science." (1997: p.251)

This brief exploration of the implications of social theory and methods helps to focus in on the factors influencing my perspective, considerations and choices. The approach that I have adopted is one that attempts to grasp the patterns and meanings that are revealed through the descriptions and actions of those involved. The interpretive tradition does however suggest meanings and explanations according to Lazark, "The social sciences should seek to grasp the meanings which individuals and social groups give to their actions and institutions." (1998: p.22). This research provides a forum for these voices to be heard, offers up narrative and discourse around the multiple experiences of power and empowerment in this time and place, and contributes my analysis to the existing literature. Situating this thesis within social theory gives meaning and context to the findings, locating it within the commentary and analysis that is social science.

## Feminist perspectives

Gender and race affect the dynamics of research and impact on the experience, as do moral and ethical considerations. These issues need some unpacking before commencing. Acknowledging the context within which we operate as a gendered space and one historically patriarchal, feminist research challenges perceived social norms. Instead, a feminist approach aims to establish non-exploitative, collaborative relationships and to conduct research that is transformative.

Ribbens and Edwards address the issues experienced by women as researchers working in an environment historically male dominated. They question the issues and barriers to gaining access and voice. They also query the status of qualitative research itself as a 'marginalised methodological discourse'<sup>28</sup>. The question of subject matter also carries value judgments, such that certain topics are given status and others not. Moreover the researcher as intermediary impacts on the empowerment process of research. Ribbens grapples with the question of bridging private stories and public knowledge, personal experiences and powerful audiences.

“Can the research process foster empowerment, via the articulation and wider communication of people's own understandings of their lives, just as I seek self-empowerment by listening to my own maternal voice? Or will our presence as researchers in relationships with interviewees, acting as the personalised interface between the expression of private meanings and their ultimate reception by the powerful audience of public knowledge production, mean that we can only offer a semblance of hearing, contributing in the end to an even more subtle subversion of private understanding?” (1998: p.37)

As a strategy and political stance, reflexivity has been used in feminist social science as it serves as a powerful analytical and methodological tool enabling sensitivity to the power relations embedded in the process of research. Haney

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<sup>28</sup> “Qualitative research almost inevitably appears ‘unconvincing’ within this relationship because dominant understandings of concepts of ‘validity’, ‘reliability’ and ‘representativeness’ are posed within a numerical rather than a process framework.” (Ribbens and Edwards 1998:p.3)

points out the results of this approach, "... feminist scholars have produced new interpretations of the forms of power embedded in everyday life." (2002: p.296)

Furthermore by redefining the informant as subject rather than object of research addresses the need for reflexivity and raises awareness of the power dynamics present in the researcher - researched relationship. Hall and Hall highlight feminist research as tackling these principles through practice, "....feminists are interested in empowerment – in investing the control over the process of the production of knowledge firmly in the hands of their informants." (1996: p.54). This perspective is clearly evident in my approach.

The parameters within which the research process sits influence the ways it is undertaken and understood. The power dynamics within the world of research, as well as within the research relationships and psyche, should be factored into the research rationale and accounted for. The potential of research as an empowering and emancipatory tool should also be considered.



## **Research as an empowering tool**

Research is not undertaken in disconnected isolation, and it can be radical or regressive. For Marvasti, participatory researchers are overtly political with an emphasis on challenging the existing social order through the generation of knowledge and by raising awareness about inequality.

“Participatory researchers are openly and explicitly political. Their ideology emphasises large-scale structural forces, conflicts of interest, and the need to overcome oppression and inequality through transforming the existing social order. The lack of access to useful and valued forms of knowledge by oppressed or disenfranchised people is viewed as a major problem that can be overcome through the research process.” (Small, 1995: p.944)  
(Marvasti, 2004: p.139)

The benefit of participatory research is the potential to raise awareness and encourage debate about public policy. It can be used to increase understanding for people about the choices and opportunities open to them, throwing new light on old problems, the perspective perhaps offering new insights and potential remedies (Marvasti, 2003: p.45).

Historically, action research has been used to actively bring about change. In the 1970's it became identified as a radical way of researching and changing social situations. In the 1990's it was used to tackle racism, sexism and other equalities issues. Torkington identifies the role of the researcher as no longer detached from the research process but rather, engaged in raising awareness and encouraging active participation in change.

“The researcher becomes activist – perhaps in helping local people gain community facilities. The people become part of the research process, learning new skills, and having their awareness raised as part of a conscious empowerment or ‘quality enhancement’ strategy.” (1991)

It should however be emphasised that participatory approaches can be used as a tool to achieve very different results, either progressive or regressive, depending

on the researcher, the research question and the perspective of the commissioning body. All of these factors influence the research method and outcome.

Whilst acknowledging the significance of the broader context within which the research is positioned, Hall and Hall reflect on the involved researcher whose personal viewpoint is integral to the research question and process.

“The personal characteristics and perspectives of the researcher are themselves regarded as part of the research, and debate is centred on other issues such as empowerment of the researched, involvement in changing society and commitment to using a variety of methods in any investigation.”  
(1996: p.51)

This repositioning of the social scientist as integral to the research process seems to me a more transparent and honest position. Acknowledging the presence and perspective of the researcher in the equation allows for an appraisal of the objective: subjective debate, and one highly relevant to my location in relation to this study. Recognition and declaration of relationships and viewpoint provide a useful foundation on which to build, and inform the stylistic choices and approach. Grounded theory and qualitative feminist methodology acknowledge the influence of all participants in the research process.

The theme of this research is power, and in order to tackle this subject with sincerity I feel that the process has to be inclusive, open, empowering, participatory, accessible and addressing equalities issues in terms of the style, content and character of the research.

## **Ethical issues**

Research is fraught with ethical dilemmas, from trust and confidentiality, to questions of representation and truth claims. I have been mindful of these issues throughout, not wishing to put my respondents in a difficult position and so adhering to practices of anonymity. Not wishing to misrepresent participants caused me some concern in terms of the selection of key findings.

Clearly there are ethical dilemmas for researchers' vis-à-vis the researched, in particular when the very realm that they are being drawn into through the process marginalises the subjects. Alldred highlights the need for openness in facing these issues and their consequences.

“Particular ethical and political dilemmas arise in representing the lives of people who are marginalised within, and by, the domain of public knowledge. In order to remain critically self-aware about the decisions we take as researchers we need to be able to make explicit both the nature of the dilemmas we face, and the losses, as well as gains, that result from our decisions.” (1998: p.147)

Understanding and accounting for the power dynamic involved and present in the processes of social research is necessary. Power operates at many different levels, both implicitly and explicitly. This has particular resonance for my thesis theme of power. Alldred describes the multi-layered power relations present in research.

“Researchers' power can be conceptualised as operating through multiple levels: through the hegemonic cultural perspective contained within the language we (must) use; through the subject positions we take up and are positioned within (including our deliberate claims to researcher positions); and through our particular individual relationships with participants and to our field of inquiry.” (ibid: p.162)

Interviewing can create ethical considerations, and Lazega (1997: p.134) describes the difficulties emerging when sensitive information is revealed<sup>29</sup>. The question of confidentiality is highly significant to protecting the interests of the researched and guarding against any harmful repercussions of their participation in the research process. The relationship between researcher and researched may well be based on trust, however, revelations exposed during qualitative research should be treated with care. In particular, this may potentially create problems if the information is taken out of context or used in a way that puts them in a difficult position. For this reason I have not used the real names or included photographs or footage of participants. Furthermore informed consent has been agreed before proceeding with interviews.

There is another ethical issue requiring attention and that is how to sensitively handle evidence and disclosures of bad practice, should they emerge. The policy context of this research brings agencies under close scrutiny, judged by positive performance criteria and funding targets. This is an environment where the sharing of mistakes may not be forthcoming. If bad practice does however emerge, the researcher is obliged to reflect this in their findings. Omitting problematic issues will mask reality and skew results. These tensions need to be managed sensitively however.

Standing describes the crucial process of writing up research, with the significance of language and access. Once again the power of the author to dictate form and function, access and audience, power and empowerment is evident, "In particular I consider the language we use when we write, and how this may play a role in sustaining hierarchies of knowledge." (1998: p.186). This issue initially created a tension where my inclusive approach led me to difficulties in balancing academic style and audience with the wish to provide an equal platform for research participants in an accessible style.

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<sup>29</sup> "...data collection can meet with understandable resistance from members whose relationships, exchanges and power games are exposed."(Lazega, 1997: p.134)

These ethical considerations can be addressed through a conscious and reflexive approach to the subject matter, a technique that informs the sensitivity with which one tackles the matter and the relationships under investigation. I have been mindful of these principles throughout.

## **Methodology conclusions**

This chapter has critically examined research methodology. I have justified and described the methods employed and detailed the specific approaches informing this research. The strengths and limitations of the different approaches have been considered and the intellectual justification for the use of interviewing to produce the detail, ethnography to provide the framework and multimedia methods to add depth. I have considered the implications and challenges of interpretation and verification of research findings. The balancing of the ethical, political, intellectual and scientific justifications in research has been expanded on, demonstrating the forces involved in undertaking academic and analytical research, and drawing this section to a close.

## **Chapter 5**

### **The West London context**

**Ealing**

**Acton**

**The community and voluntary sector**

**Council structures**

**Political opportunities in West London**

## Ealing

The context of this research will be set by a brief summary of geographical and demographic data. I shall select quantitative statistics and background information that is of particular relevance to my research question. The area of study is London, with its world city status and intimately affected by the forces of globalisation. I will be looking at one of the thirty-three London Boroughs in West London: Ealing, with a particular emphasis on Acton. The map below illustrates Ealing's location in relation to the other London boroughs.



([http://www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/Corporation/maps/london\\_map.htm](http://www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/Corporation/maps/london_map.htm))<sup>30</sup>

Ealing has the third largest population of the London boroughs, with an estimated population of over 320,000. Despite this it is still a small fragment of London, accounting for 4.1% of the population and 1.4% of the land area. Population growth is above London and England averages, with projections suggesting that the population will grow to 350,000 by 2028. These figures<sup>31</sup> are influenced by

<sup>30</sup> Data from the City of London Corporation.

<sup>31</sup> Population profiles and statistics from Ealing Council publications, and accessible on the council website [www.ealing.gov.uk](http://www.ealing.gov.uk), and from [www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk](http://www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk)



Ealing's proximity to key international transport hubs, and in particular Heathrow airport. Patterns and distributions of old and newly arriving communities reflect these connections, as well as the effects of international trade, war and an increasingly globalised world.

In terms of its size and composition Ealing covers 55 kilometres and is itself divided into the seven districts of Ealing, Hanwell, Acton, Southall, Greenford, Perivale and Northolt. Politically, Ealing is currently under Conservative administration (since the 2006 elections), following a twelve year period under Labour control. Although some Ealing ward seats have remained unchanged for many years, overall Ealing is not a 'comfortable seat' and therefore councillors can't afford to become complacent. Rather than exhibiting entrenched attitudes and practices, the public sector tends to be outward looking, taking on board new ideas and ways of working, including the decentralisation of decision-making processes. The community sector is well established in Ealing with many active and experienced volunteers and professionals. I shall return to this sector shortly.



([http://www.ealing.gov.uk/services/council/councillors/councillors\\_by\\_ward/](http://www.ealing.gov.uk/services/council/councillors/councillors_by_ward/))

Areas of relative affluence sit alongside areas of poverty in Ealing. Real estate, renting and business activities are the largest sector employer in the borough accounting for 25% of all employment. Work in retail and wholesale distribution accounts for a further 22%. Home to a thriving media industry with the B.B.C. H.Q., Ealing Studios, Bollywood studios and related industries all clustered in the area. Whilst sharing in West London's prosperous economy, Ealing also contains many areas of severe social and economic disadvantage. There are wide disparities between different areas of the borough in terms of education, skills, employment, income and health. Ealing is the 75<sup>th</sup> most deprived out of the 354 local authorities in England. 23% of Ealing areas are within the top 20% most deprived nationally, and an increase in Ealing areas falling within the 10% most deprived<sup>32</sup>.

Ealing has one of the most ethnically diverse populations in the U.K. with over 40% of its population belonging to black, minority and ethnic groups. It has the fourth most ethnically diverse population of the country's 354 local authorities<sup>33</sup>. The largest communities with a distinctive cultural identity are the Indian, Black African, Pakistani and Black Caribbean communities. The borough hosts the largest Somali population in the U.K.. Ealing also has a noteworthy proportion of people belonging to non-British White ethnic groups including Irish, Antipodeans and Eastern Europeans, and a well-established Polish community (the largest in the U.K.), as well as growing numbers of new arrivals (since extending European Union membership) live here. Indeed, Ealing has the largest number of Indians, Poles, Afghanis and Iraqis in London. There are also increasing communities of migrants who are refugees or seeking asylum. More than 100 languages are spoken amongst school children. From this data it is clear that changes in international law and migration patterns are having local ramifications, once again evidencing the effects of globalisation within the local context.

Ealing also has a diverse religious population with a significantly higher proportion of people of Sikh, Muslim and Hindu faith than other parts of London, England or

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<sup>32</sup> 13 LSOAs / lower super output areas in 2007 compared to 9 in 2004 (data from the 2007 Indices of Deprivation and Ealing Borough, Analysis report, June 2008).

<sup>33</sup> Source: State of Ealing. 2009. Population.

Wales<sup>34</sup>. In fact, Ealing has the highest number of Sikhs in London with nearly 26,000, and one of the highest Muslim populations in London with over 31,000. Ealing's population compared with London in percentage terms is shown in the table<sup>35</sup>.

<b>Demographic</b>	<b>% Ealing</b>	<b>% London</b>
BME population	41.2	28.9
Population born outside UK	31.0	21.8
Asian community	24.5	12.1
Faith communities:		
- Christian	50.7	58.2
- Hindu	7.8	4.1
- Muslim	10.3	8.5
- Sikh	8.5	1.5
Economically active	68.4	67.6
With disability or long term illness	15.1	15.5

References to recent debates that reflect the theme of power in this thesis are worth noting here. The ongoing debate about the extension of Heathrow Airport into an even bigger major international airport has implications for the airport as a huge employer in the area attracting old and new migrants (in terms of the construction of the new runway and Terminal 5, as well as in the service industries and airport staff). In itself this debate is having huge implications locally, with environmental protestors, residents associations and local pressure groups rallying against the growth, versus government interests, the airlines, B.A.A. and businesses keen to expand. This exemplifies the complexity of the global and local implications of planning and development issues.

<sup>34</sup> Figures from the 2001 Census found on the Government website [www.statistics.gov.uk/census2001](http://www.statistics.gov.uk/census2001)

<sup>35</sup> Table from Change-Up, Ealing Voluntary Sector ten year plan.

## **Acton**

Of the seven Ealing towns, this study involves representation mostly from Acton-based individuals and organisations. I shall therefore describe this area in more depth with a brief look at its historical development through to the present demographics. Located to the East of the borough, Acton includes the wards of East Acton, Acton Central, South Acton, Hanger Hill and Southfields. Evolving from farmsteads, Acton slowly grew during the nineteenth century. As it developed it housed both upper middleclass homes, as well as slum dwellings. By the late nineteenth century Acton became known for the large number of laundries based there, becoming known as 'Soapsud Island'. By the 1920's Acton became heavily industrialised, particularly concentrated in the Acton Vale and Park Royal areas. Immigration into Acton escalated after 1945, chiefly from Ireland, the Caribbean and Poland. Acton has continued to grow, with changing economic activity and related housing and demographic trends. Today, Acton is incredibly ethnically diverse, with Somali, Iraqi, Afghan, Japanese and Eastern European communities more recently adding to the mix.

Areas within South and East Acton feature highly in the 2004 Indices of Deprivation. In terms of multiple deprivations there are five areas in Acton that are located within the top 20% most deprived in England. South Acton ranks third most deprived ward nationally, where 75% of children are income-deprived. With regards to the measures of income deprivation, employment, education, health, the environment, housing, services and crime, there are areas within Acton which feature within the top 5% most deprived in England.

South Acton estate is the largest housing estate in West London, some say Europe, with approximately 2,000 homes and 6,000 residents. Currently undergoing major 15 year phased regeneration, the area is also home to numerous challenges arising from the high levels of deprivation experienced there. The area consists of poor housing, with residents describing the neglect of the area and its housing stock, with common problems of vandalism and drug dealing exacerbating the problems. The residents association is however, active and vocal in the area.

From the Acton perspective, there are many local illustrations of planning disputes where the local community has rallied against proposed developments in their neighbourhood. There have been two recent debates: firstly when the Acton Gardening Association took on the Park Club and Virgin Active, as big business encroached on publicly owned land. Here a small community association in Acton Vale challenged the approach and actions of these profit-driven companies. Secondly, the South Acton Residents Action Group has fought a long battle with the local authority and the developers throughout the regeneration process in South Acton to ensure that resident voices are heard.

This brief look at Acton and its changing features provides a sense of how the area has evolved over time and the characteristics of the area. From this context, the ways communities live, work, organise and develop can be seen in relation to the wider effects of economic, political and administrative changes. It is within this environment that the research respondents are located and operate. The spaces created in Ealing generally, and Acton particularly, contextualises the opportunities for community empowerment and partnership working within and between the sectors.

## The community and voluntary sector

Ealing has one of the largest voluntary sectors in West London. Those known to be active in the different parts of the borough can be seen in the table below, showing the area concentrations. Reflecting the borough's diversity, the community and voluntary sector contains large numbers of B.M.E.R. and faith groups, notably clustered around the areas of highest deprivation in Southall and Acton.

Interestingly, the three highest voluntary and community sector concentrations are in the areas with active and strong support structures, in the form of the second tier voluntary sector organisation bases: Acton Community Forum, Ealing Community Network and Southall Community Alliance<sup>36</sup>.

Area	Groups	%
Acton	168	21%
Ealing / West Ealing	189	24%
Hanwell	61	8%
Southall	181	23%
Northolt	52	6%
Greenford / Perivale	70	8%
Out of borough (but working in Ealing)	84	10%
<b>Group size</b>		
Less than 2 staff	535	66%
More than 2 staff	270	34%

Ealing community sector groups by area and size.

Ealing's well established voluntary sector has changed and developed in line with changes in demographics, funding opportunities and capacity building initiatives. Despite these changes however, there are representatives from this sector who have extensive experience, local knowledge and appreciation of local and national

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<sup>36</sup> Data source from Ealing Community and Voluntary Service and their website <http://www.ealingcvsv.org.uk>

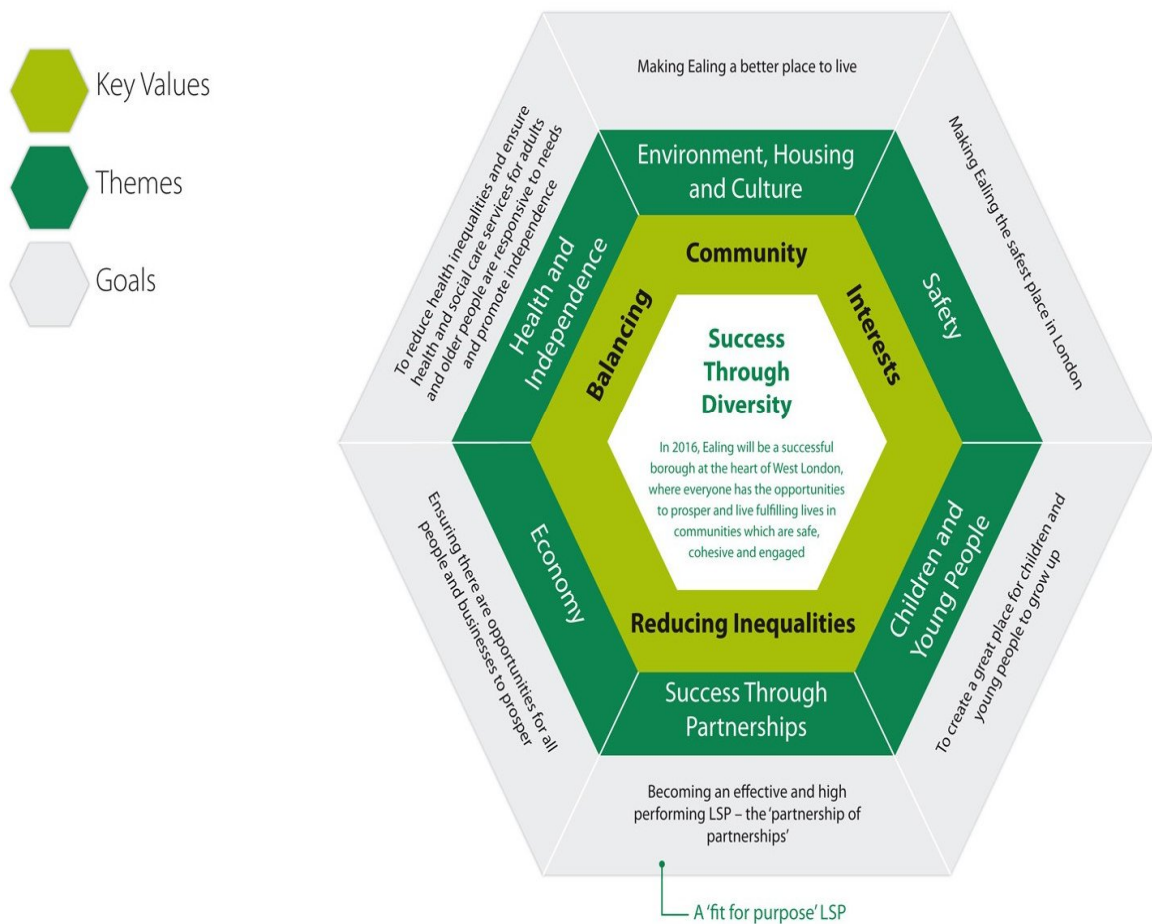
agendas. The significance of these factors on the sector will be explored further in this research. The diagram below illustrates the support mechanisms offered by the second tier organisations in Ealing and gives an indication of the sector, its role, the range of support services, resources and organisational capacity building opportunities available to Ealing's community organisations.

As an area where there are examples of small and large community organisations, already established or more recently forming to address local interests, together with thriving voluntary sector support organisations, the area is ideally suited for investigation into how this sector conceptualises and approaches community empowerment in line with a changing context and priorities.

## Council structures

Having looked at Ealing demographics, communities and voluntary sector, this brief look at the statutory sector acts as a framework within which to place the urban actors contributing to this study. The ways residents of Ealing, as well as the voluntary and community sector connect and fit within local authority values, themes and goals can be seen in Ealing's Community Strategy (depicted below). The balancing of community and statutory interests is highlighted, evidencing an awareness of the potential tensions. The aspiration is to address existing inequalities. The structures are now in place, the policy is being translated into practice, and the challenge is to do this in an accessible and transparent manner.

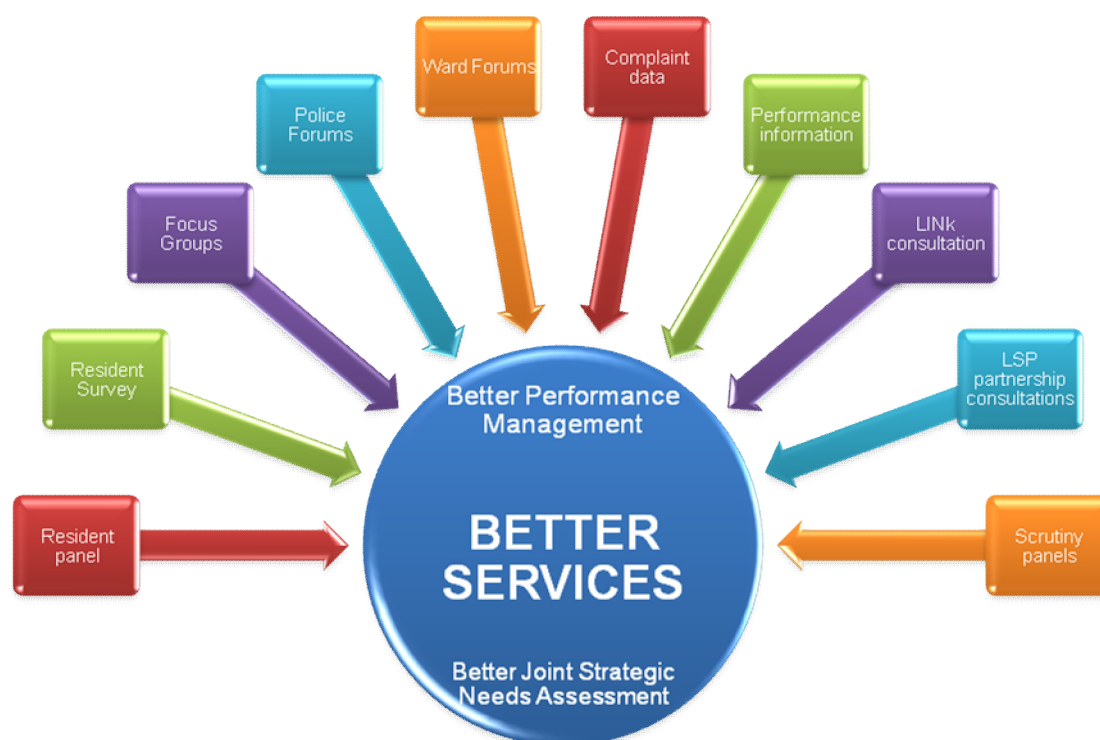
### Ealing's Community Strategy





## Political opportunities in West London

In the last ten years, two significant government policy agendas have impacted at the local level, the devolution of power and policies that tackle deprivation. These policies have influenced Ealing, with greater strategic attention on the needs of deprived areas and populations through regeneration initiatives and political devolution. National policy directives, focused funding streams, attention on local priorities, a key role for bridging organisations, community engagement, and uptake by the voluntary sector are all evident in West London. Significantly, linkages between economic and social objectives are apparent, with cross-sector partnerships, networking and new ways of working emerging. This research explores how effective these social and economic inclusion policy opportunities are in practice, identifying where and how community empowerment is apparent. Recent local authority policy providing opportunities for civic renewal and involvement are emerging (depicted below). The emphasis on improving service delivery is evident, alongside structures enabling consultation and encouraging dialogue.



(Ealing Civic Renewal Policy 2009 -12)

This background information about Ealing helps to set the scene and context for the research presented here. It also identifies what political opportunities are present, and indeed who is positioned to take up these opportunities. Clearly this data has implications for this study, and outlines the baseline information on which my study will build. The themes and areas of contestation referred to highlight the area as one worthy of further research and investigation.

The focus on Ealing with its thriving community and voluntary sector, statutory and corporate sectors open to the effects of globalisation and development provides a wealth of potential for investigation into the strategies and approaches to community empowerment and governance in the area. The remainder of this investigation tackles the analysis of the research findings, beginning by introducing the research actors, their perception, location and practice.

## **Analysis of Findings**

## **Chapter 6**

### **The Personal and the Positional**

**Personal testimonies and the consequences of context**

**The effects of positionality on perspectives of power**

## **Personal testimonies and the consequences of context**

The private and public location of participants is examined in this section. I begin by looking at their personal motivations and how this affects approaches to community empowerment, as well as the consequences of changing context. Here I will introduce the actors, their origins, their influences and motivations. I then go on to examine the effects of positionality on perceptions of power and how far experience is linked to positionality.

This process helps to clarify patterns in the motivations of people from varied backgrounds, working in very different fields, hearing their voices and situating them personally, theoretically and politically. In this way I aim to identify characteristics that are evident between and across the sectors, as well as to discover qualities apparent both horizontally and vertically. What follows are samples of significant testimonies that identify motivational values and perspectives of power, and indicate how this impacts on practice.

For Efia, performance artist and cultural activist, the centrality of family, identity, education and struggle are evident. Efia is actively involved in a number of community-based organisations with a focus on culture and young people including Positive Awareness, Black History and Culture West London and she has recently established her own organisation, Writing, Acting, Publishing Projects for Youngsters (W.A.P.P.Y.). London-based and of Ghanaian heritage, she has an intrinsic belief that there is more to life than it appears, and wants to contribute something more to society. Throughout her life key people have contributed to Efia's development, people who were willing to provide opportunities, offer inspiration and hope. Having experienced the benefits of this support, she in turn wants to make a contribution to other peoples' growth. The way Efia has lived has affected her thought and action, seeing the link between the personal and political

“...my own life...is full of, you know, moving around from....an English family where I was privately fostered, to an African family, going to a Catholic convent, then coming back to London and getting to know my parents. This is what has made me the person I am today. So if you ask me about my

achievement and my identity .... you can understand why maybe I've ended up doing all these different things, and maybe why I've got multi-faceted skills and struggles, you see." (Efia)

Efia has developed self-belief, seeing her evolution shaping the person she is today. She feels that there is something important about her struggle that has determined her life choices. Efia began with heightened awareness and self-development growing into community, cultural and political activism.

A very different story emerges from Mathew, Honorary Secretary and member of the Acton Gardening Association and journalist with a long career with B.B.C. television, L.B.C. radio and writer of several books, articles and features. Mathew is a commentator, correspondent and critic. He is also an urban environmental activist, supporting local ecological causes and using a variety of tactics to represent those without a voice in response to the perceived erosion of rights.

"I'm a writer-broadcaster. So it says on my business card. But I have another card that says 'inner city environmentalist.' Haa! I'm an inner city environmentalist really, that's what I have been steered towards. ... everybody wants labels from you, so that's what I say I am really." (Mathew)

With passion, an enquiring mind and investigative qualities, Mathew pursues his interests actively, applying his journalistic skills to his environmental and allotment interests. With the threat from private developers that meant a loss of allotments, he began a campaign to protect green spaces. Adapting to new challenges has triggered Mathew's steep learning curve as a community activist, using networks, information and action to assert the concerns of the powerless. With the contacts and communication available to him professionally, Mathew is able to bring local and national issues into the worldwide arena.

Saabir, elder and Chair of the Society of Afghan Residents in the United Kingdom, was born in Afghanistan nearly eighty years ago, moving to the U.K. as a refugee in the early eighties. Saabir has made London his home, along with his extended family and is part of a sizeable Afghan community. He has a strong sense of duty which has developed as a result of exposure to the problems faced by fellow refugees and feeling that his organisation **must** help with any problem they are

made aware of. He describes the history and reasons why his organisation was originally established, and how this has changed with circumstances and time. In the early 1980's Saabir gathered a small number of interested parties together and founded S.A.R. U.K. to provide information and advice for the growing Afghan community. As global forces impacting on the Afghan people have changed, so the organisation's priorities and focus has also transformed from political to social and cultural in nature. Saabir describes how the work focus has evolved along with the local, national and international environment.

"I am the Chair of the Society of Afghan Residents in the United Kingdom. This is an independent society. The first time it was established was 1982. At that time it was the Russian invasion of Afghanistan. At that time we established the society, and also our political activities were going on. .... But after 1987, this would be totally social, non-political: social and cultural."  
(Saabir)

S.A.R. U.K. also aims to educate the wider society about the circumstances that lead to refugees becoming exiled from their homeland, and drawing on the U.N. Refugee Charter to inform his campaigning. They also provide solidarity to other refugee organisations and international aid agencies, intervening in support of refugee rights.

Karina, coordinator of the Oaktree Playscheme, provides a very different account. Trinidadian born, Karina came to London as an adult where she raised her family, and became increasingly active in her community informally and formally. She became an activist due to the clear need for positive activity in South Acton. Karina's personal involvement has grown from emotive personal and local experiences. Having empowered herself, she now empowers others through her work within the primary school, through the playscheme and within her neighbourhood - all focused within a half-mile radius.

"If it's not from the heart, it's not going to come out good. And that is why when I do things I do it from the heart." (Karina)

In terms of South Acton estate, she feels that local people have been undervalued and marginalised, and that instead they should be treated with respect and involved in decisions affecting their lives. She feels that with growing confidence,

the beneficiaries are more able and willing to participate and express their opinions. Two of the playscheme committee members' sons have been murdered, and this is a clear driving force in their involvement in creating opportunity and hope.

"I think that we live on the estate and have the responsibility to make sure that it's run in the most appropriate way, so that the community is benefiting from it." (Karina)

Chair of Acton Vale Tenants and Residents Association, Jai's guiding principles are similarly central to his commitments. Born in Hong Kong in the early 1960's, he and his family joined his father in the U.K. when he was ten years old. Of Chinese heritage, Jai has a long-established interest in supporting ordinary people, initially only in a voluntary capacity, but subsequently professionally as well through his work with Ealing Community and Voluntary Service.

"My upbringing taught me that if you can give something back to the community and do something, it's good. Smiling faces and the people enjoying themselves is reward enough" (Jai)

Jai feels he has the confidence and experience to handle challenges which provide a strong position from which to voice and take forward residents rights. Over time, Jai has built strong partnerships and adapted to tackle threats locally.

Khenan, Committee Member of the South Acton Residents Action Group, has developed a clear and conscious understanding of the power of cooperation, based on his core values. He believes that involvement in transformation is something that is part of our role as citizens. Jamaican born and London-based, Khenan has maintained a global perspective, conscious, campaigning and active. Politically aware in Jamaica as a young man where he witnessed the effects of colonialism on the colonised, he now applies this to the present capitalist relations in London. He has retained his longstanding belief in solidarity and action to challenge oppressive practice.

"I come from a background where....I come from a colony, and my understanding is that the only time that things happen is when people actually decide that they will actually win." (Khenan)



Khenan's life / work priorities and approaches are rooted in his socio-political beliefs, each informing the other and further reinforcing his trust in community action. He encourages practice based on outward looking empowering principles emerging from his global outlook.

“...my view is that you must become a part of the cooperative movement rather than just be managers. And that is a very, very important decision. Because the cooperative movement has an international meaning ... whereas T.M.O.<sup>37</sup> is parochial in a way, it doesn't even go into Scotland you know. Ha. You know, that's my view, I just feel that we must realistically and essentially be a part of the co-operative movement. So the power that we have is the power that we have earned by developing solidarity outside of our boundary.” (Khenan)

A life-time of radical activism and now retired, Khenan continues to dedicate his life to community action.

Charlotte, Acton High School Extended Schools Coordinator, has strong founding principles based on her passion and beliefs. Born in the Midlands, an education professional, she speaks of feeling a moral obligation, having a set of standards she works to and an appreciation of 'the greater good.' Education is central for Charlotte, who applies her personal principles to her approaches to work, and has developed enabling strategies in her practice. Charlotte reflects on and retains her sense of justice in her dealings.

“And I think vision, passion, beliefs. If you can communicate a vision, an idea. And actually, the powerful thing is how much of your whole self is communicating that: then that is powerful. It doesn't make you into a powerful person. It's not power itself. It's the concept, and the expression, and the rationale, and the morals, and the values: are powerfully expressed, which have an impact”. (Charlotte)

Bari, Director of the Pupil Parent Partnership, articulates his beliefs, born out in his choice of profession and area of specialism of supporting young people and their

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<sup>37</sup> A Tenant Management Organisation is a means by which council or housing association tenants and leaseholders can collectively take on responsibility for managing the homes they live in.

families facing difficulties. Born and living in Zanzibar until the Civil War, he adapted to life in the U.K. when he came here as a boy in the sixties and he has faced many challenging experiences. These have influenced the direction he chose in life, directing his challenges into support for others in difficulty.

“Refugee from East Africa, I came to England when I was 10 ½, due to Civil War in Zanzibar. I came with my family and we moved to Cornwall ... and we ended up being the only Black family in Cornwall in 1964. ... I didn't get on at all well in the school, but you had to get through it somehow. Lots of trouble for family with skinheads and all those sorts of things. Trained as a teacher at the end of it all, and qualified as an English and Drama teacher.

(Bari)

Surviving an alien education system, facing racism and discrimination, he worked in education, youth work and counselling, finally establishing his own organisation that brought these disciplines together. Bari sees that as a relatively small organisation without mainstream funding, P.P.P. operates with small amounts of money and large amounts of sincerity. He believes in a holistic approach to life, and feels that a lot of effort is needed to discover and live by your principles. The passage of time and experience has affected Bari in that he still works from the same principles and philosophy, but his practice is now different and more effective in his view with the benefit of understanding. He feels that his appreciation of time has changed and he is more realistic now, wanting to persist in his life's work, continue to have new visions and to support marginalised young people to build their confidence and make a positive contribution.

Sean was born and grew up in Liverpool, moving to London as a student in the late seventies where he has remained. The era in which he became politically active as a student was under Thatcherism, when the erosion of rights saw resistance by trade unions and those seeking equality.

“If you look back over the last thirty years there have been some wonderful examples of people coming together to change things. Like Rock Against Racism, or Kick Racism Out of Football. They had major impacts at the time, but the job is far from done. And then there was Greenham Common, which was a marvellous collection of people, the Miners Strike, Grunwick,

where you had power, coalitions in terms of people and organisations involved, the idealism, the tools they had at their disposal. The problem was that successive governments gave themselves greater powers so that their view could prevail.” (Sean)

He has worked in regeneration and community development, negotiating compromises between community interests and economic or statutory interests. For Sean, Manager of Acton Community Forum, principles of the organisation are based on having clear values. He also has a cynical side, seeing the negative and detrimental effects of people having personal agendas that come before group/community agendas. He feels that where there are shared values however, people can come together to effectively influence their circumstances.

Mahamad, Coordinator of The Tallo Information Centre and Somali Summer University, is the only respondent to reference the centrality of spirituality in his life, this informing how he sees and operates in the world. Born in Mogadishu in Somalia in 1972, he came to the U.K. as an asylum-seeker in 1997. He has experienced struggle and has adapted to life’s challenges whilst embracing opportunities. Indeed, Mahamad actively seeks out and creates opportunity. For him individual growth and knowledge are important. Mahamad’s professional practice is shaped by these principles as he strives to address the needs of his community.

“Knowledge is about having the right decision. ... And this also goes back into my experience into other issues relating to spiritualism. Because in a sense, knowledge is not enough of making decisions, of whether you have power, or don’t have power. But that itself is a tool: having the right click, or the right understanding, or the right take on the issues that you are in. The knowledge that we need is spirit controlled, guides the way.” (Mahamad)

For Mahamad learning and shared experiences lead him towards committing himself to working with the community. Empathy and humanity are essential for Mahamad, with these principles impacting on his priorities and approaches. Clearly, Mahamad has adapted to the changing needs of refugee communities within the context of shifting international factors, national policy priorities and local government agendas, as well as the impact of the media and public opinion.

Earl was born in Jamaica and is a 'larger than life' character with a diverse career spanning the military (serving in the British Army, and currently Chair of the West Indian Ex-Service's Association), the music industry (with 'The Foundations', 'Chairman of the Board', and currently 'Dark Dog'), politics (elected as Councillor in Lewisham in the nineties) and community (implementing central governments Neighbourhood Renewal in partnership with residents). He is passionate about life, bringing this enthusiasm to all that he is involved with.

"I believe in fairness and justice, and I believe in cause and effect, and that you can never hide the truth, and that good will overcome evil." (Earl)

As South Acton Neighbourhood Renewal Service Improvement Coordinator, he expresses his core values, showing how these inter-relate with his practice.

Born in the U.K. of Caribbean heritage, Naomi has a strong sense of equalities issues. Professionally, she believes it is necessary to have equality situated centrally for positive policies and practice to be possible. As Director of the Ealing Race Equality Council, her professional practice is informed by these personal beliefs in equality of opportunity, with its focus on disseminating and demanding good practice throughout the public sector. The resistance and barriers that Naomi has experienced clearly impacts on the way she now tackles institutionalised inequality, such that she uses a range of different approaches that provide alternative empowering support for B.M.E.R. organisations or challenging local authority leadership.

"I personally feel that although national government lay down the rules and regs, my gosh! Does local government implement it? Or not? And I think it's also who leads that local authority as well. ... you've got to have communities at heart otherwise it's not going to work. And notice I said **communities**." (Naomi)

Naomi has increasingly turned her opinions into action and carved out a position from which she has the power to raise issues and pressurise compliance with equalities rights and responsibilities.

Sally was born in Canada, moving to London as a child. As a young single mother her experience of family-life and struggle sparked a greater consciousness of and engagement with the broader community.

“My first motivations were around a desire to have access to information for myself, to keep my children safe and know what’s going on around them.”

(Sally)

Sally worked with the Play Service when her children were small, then with the Youth Service as they grew older. Her affinity with estate-based provision stems to some extent from living on one herself, where she supports young people and helps them make informed decisions. Her commitment extends beyond her professional employment into her personal life. London Borough of Ealing’s Youth and Connexions Officer, and Vice Chair of the Acton Vale Community Association, Sally uses her personal qualities and relationships with people for guidance in her life and work. For her it’s about character and how she interlinks with others, describing herself as a ‘people person’ more than a strategist. Sally is self-critical and reflexive, recognising that she is not focused enough on planning and strategy to be most effective. Instead, she knows where her strengths lie, using these to empower young people and the grassroots community.

“I struggle a lot with trying to be really confident about what my role is within all that, because sometimes I feel that I’m not enough senior managementy stuff, I’m much more about the people and how it all links ... I do loads of that kind of thinking. But I think in my more confident moments that without it, all we’ve got is policy on paper and people floundering around trying to do their own thing. But in my less confident moments: am I not enabling people to move on, and make a new and modern service?” (Sally).

Proud of his Welsh ancestry and educated at Swansea University, Dillan came to London as a young man to develop his career. Currently Planning and Strategy manager in the London Borough of Ealing’s Planning Department, he has worked in the local authority for over twenty-five years. During this time he has made efforts to reach people with a particular interest in planning policies. He is committed however to accessing the ‘hard to reach’, believing it would add value to

his work and by extension civil society as a whole. Dillan demonstrates his personal values which are reflected in his professional practice and priorities.

“... in terms of its community leadership role and its proposals for the community, whether it's in terms of property or education or whatever else, that there should be equally a sort of efficient relationship to the people in the community on those matters as well, and that would of course add a lot of value to the sort of work that I'm responsible for.” (Dillan)

Of Northern Irish background, Sinéad went on to live and teach in Turkey, married a Turk, and they now live together in London with their children. Sure Start Acton officer, Sinéad has transformed from parent recipient of services to officer responsible for their delivery.

“I was a Mum with a small child at the time, and I was approached by the charity that took on the contract to actually get an idea of what was needed in the area, to set up the project and see what parents wanted from it. So I came in truly as a client which was quite a good way to get into it.” (Sinéad)

She retains an affinity with other local parents, whilst becoming increasingly knowledgeable about the framework and the tensions within which provision sits. Sinéad feels that the organisation's non-hierarchical nature impacts on their service-users and influences local families' empowerment, as the nurturing structures support parents to develop confidence. But Sinéad fears that this is threatened as Sure Start becomes absorbed into the mainstream with its more restrictive and hierarchical systems.

Donald is Scottish and has lived much of his adult life in London working as a Housing officer in Ealing for some twenty years. Communication and Involvement Manager for Ealing Homes<sup>38</sup>, he observes that people are increasingly aware of their rights and progressively more proactive in solving life's challenges. He points out how policy demonstrably impacts on practice within his field and amongst colleagues in the statutory sector. He also notes a shift to a consumer culture amongst service-users. Donald has adjusted his approach to resident engagement and found residents attitudes have altered too.

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<sup>38</sup> Ealing Homes manages Ealing Council housing stock.

“I think it’s coming from government, and I think maybe people are more enlightened about the whole thing now anyway, they’re not just waiting on the government to tell us.” (Donald).

Similarly, Sam has worked in Housing for many years, initially with a social landlord. However with the enormous changes in this sector, he now represents community interests in what is increasingly a commercial sector. Like Sinéad, Sam has also developed concerns and anxieties over time. He works in Community Development for Acton Housing Association and the Dominion Housing Group in an environment that has led him to become cynical, believing that some of the practices in the world of housing development are morally wrong. Sam questions peoples’ motives for seeking power, but tries to do the right thing where he can, feeling that it should simply come down to mutual respect. Very much a family man, he draws on these core values to inform his practice.

“I’m a firm believer in ... ‘Those who seek power should never be given it.’ I think that’s an absolute truth. I mean the tenets that I try and teach my kids and try and live by is ‘Treat people the way you want to be treated’, and that’s it. ... You become increasingly cynical I suppose about people’s motives and why people are doing things the way they are.” (Sam)

Involved in major development projects but also standing on several voluntary sector boards, Sam has an overview of the dynamics and their implications. His role is one of balancing these forces. His fear is however, that the scales are tipped towards those with the power, despite efforts to redress the imbalance. Sam grapples with the ethical dilemmas he faces.

“On a personal level I think it’s appalling. ... I don’t understand from a moral perspective why, from the instant you become a tenant you are more likely to get anti-social behaviour and why you should have to pay for that any more than any resident in the rest of the Borough. I just think that it’s morally wrong.” (Sam)

Sam’s practice has been impacted by his appreciation of the tensions in his field. His attempts to ensure community issues are considered are met by the pre-eminence of economic and political forces. Despite frustration and scepticism, he

continues to push for change, demonstrating his determination within the R.S.L. domain, and maintains representation within the voluntary sector.

More positively however, in terms of values, Charlie, Community Liaison Inspector for the Borough, and part of the Metropolitan Police Authority, refers to the huge cultural change in the way that London is policed. Here, personal preferences and practice influence one another, with officers responding to policy changes. His long service in the police force provides Charlie with insight into police culture and the characteristics that prevail.

“I think there’s something around police culture which comes back from the fact that most of us, most police officers anyway, have been brought up in an environment where you make quick decisions. Do things quite quickly and you sort of have a ‘can do’ approach to things, most of the time. And that’s sometimes affected in the decisions that are supposed to be long-term decisions, which can be a good thing because it means things get done.”  
(Charlie)

In contrast, Ahmed has shifted his position in a more critical direction over time in response to changing contexts. Having experienced life in a refugee camp in the Middle East, moving to the U.K. as a student initially and becoming increasingly proactive through political action and democratic involvement, he acknowledges the importance of freedom of speech and how precious this is in the U.K.. His personal views and life experiences clearly inspire his action and involvement.

“Brought up in a refugee camp where deprivation was rife. My children now have all the things I lacked. My views on community activism derive almost solely from my background and the conditions in which I grew up. Consequently they are tinged with the political.” (Ahmed)

Ahmed believes that he represents the Arab community morally when he speaks on their behalf. In terms of the political system, a tension has become evident for him however. Ahmed praises the Labour Party but when it comes to the topic of Iraq he is against party policy. This has presented him with considerable personal dilemmas.



“I’m accountable to them because I feel that I don’t represent all of them in the technical terms but I represent them morally when I speak on their behalf to the government, to the party, when I speak on television. I have to be very, very careful with what I say because otherwise I would be dishonest, I would be betraying them. I have to be very, very careful with what I say and what I do.” (Ahmed)

In summary, then, having looked at the backgrounds and personal motivations of those taking part in the research, it has emerged that some participants express their ethical founding principles that permeate their life choices, whilst others speak with less passion about general principles guiding their approach to work. Everyone makes reference to some aspect of their life and work principles being informed by their values however. I am struck by the fact that the vast proportion experiences the penetration of their principles into their personal and political choices. Those that are activists take this attribute to the extreme where their lives express their deeply felt beliefs, acting as guiding forces manifest in their passionate and long-lasting commitment to their cause. Values are evident across the sample though, being true of those working as community activists in the voluntary sector, but also of those working within the mainstream as officers in the statutory sector, and significantly with those who have both community **and** statutory experience. This is emerging as a significant finding, and one that challenges the suggestion that activists and officers are diametrically opposed. Indeed, the location of individuals with grassroots and statutory knowledge demonstrate an empathy and appreciation that informs their practice, and I suggest has the potential to address empowerment creatively and effectively.

Here the focus has been on introducing respondents and revealing where there are similarities and differences between them. The differences are not necessarily as I had predicted at the outset however, and certainly do not neatly fit in terms of positionality. Here the personal motives have been illustrated, demonstrating the ways these affect community empowerment practices. These findings verify that people and organisations are motivated by deeply held values which inform their conceptions of power. The stories reveal enduring principles, with a clear evolution

of approach influenced by the personal, local, national and international context. The personal and political entwine, and find different degrees of expression, depending on how much freedom an individual or organisation has. The more localised and limited the focus, the easier to positively influence perhaps; the more global and far-reaching, the more difficult it is to exert control over outcomes. Notably, living the global in the local has implications for practice amongst my sample that carry their international identity into their regional experiences. These personal expressions concerning the impact of globalisation on localised thinking and practice intrigue me and bring the debate alive. The area of study and research participants themselves both personify globalisation in action, demonstrating the way that these wider perspectives are incorporated into local action. The following section will look at the impact of positionality on these findings, and in particular any sectoral differences.

## The effects of positionality on power

Further developing the analysis of sectoral difference, the degree that community activists and frontline professional's perspectives and personal motivations impact upon their practice is explored here and summarised in the table below. The extent that their experiences in practice affect their views and perspectives in turn, are to some degree related to positionality, although not exclusively so. The changing context of governance has different implications and repercussions for those in different sectors, with their diverse roles affecting their sphere of influence, effectiveness and access to power. By examining testimonies from different sectors it has been possible to examine the effects of positionality on opinion and experience.

### **Differences between sectors** lie in the:

- feelings of marginalisation
- experiences of having no voice / having voice
- extent of the need to build networks
- degrees of commitment and solidarity
- areas of focus
- specialisms
- different arenas within which people operate

### **Similarities across the sectors** can be found in the:

- desire to make a positive contribution
- lengths of time involved
- recognition of different areas of expertise
- need to communicate
- determination to create routes that work towards greater community involvement, influence and power

Table showing sectoral differences and similarities in perspective and motivation

The research findings and the analysis of content uncovers remarkable similarities, as well as notable differences, as experienced and identified in the testimonies of this cross-section of people from varied backgrounds. Patterns emerge, revealing different realities and common principles, some cross-cutting the different sectors, others showing horizontal differentiation.

Despite differences in the degree of focus on community empowerment issues, with community activists directing most of their energy to this end, it has become apparent that - contrary to popular belief and polarising models such as the Marxist tradition that highlights conflict associated with capital - the reality may be far less simple. In fact, many frontline professionals have emerged from the community context themselves, demonstrating empathy for and commitment towards community empowerment principles and practices. Certainly, the voluntary and community sector representatives, as well as the second-tier professionals have very firm community roots, with workers often coming from the communities they now represent professionally. This link affects their determination to strive towards empowerment at a neighbourhood level and focus on addressing community concerns in their work. A number of these professionals also have direct personal experience of the difficulties faced by the people they represent, this forming a clear link and ongoing dedication. It should be noted however, that it could have gone the other way, and that this characteristic is not pursued universally.

As identified earlier, core values affect the sample's life choices, particularly focused on the desire to 'make a difference'. The choice of occupation and approach are undoubtedly different in nature, whilst the paths people have chosen reflect their different personal qualities, revealing their ideologies and motives. Clearly, officers working within departments with targets and workloads to address still show evidence of participatory principles. Whilst acknowledging my sample bias toward people that I have long-standing relationships with and who exhibit personal and professional commitment, I have nonetheless been struck by the extent of the dedication revealed. Despite very different origins, environments and approaches, there is evidence of commitment to community empowerment across the sample. The ways people have elected to do this has led them down different

paths, some focusing on making the built environment work, others through focusing upon community cohesion issues, some by making the city a safe place to live, others by providing constructive activities for young people, whilst some support the empowerment of local people more generally. Despite being from such varied backgrounds, working in different fields, and whether community empowerment is the primary or secondary focus, the unifying theme of working toward 'the greater good' prevails across the sectors.

Activists from all sectors express their deeply felt beliefs, apparent in their passionate, long-standing commitment evident in their life and work. This is evident in their choice to work professionally and / or voluntarily towards supporting communities find their voice, actively participate in social change and civil society, and address problems of inaccessibility and inequality. Resident activists and housing officers; environmental protesters and planning officers; refugee advice organisations and the police; education professionals and youth workers; may appear to represent polar opposites, and yet common values and commitment can be seen too. This is an important finding of this research, and substantiates the view that across the sample there are people and organisations motivated by deeply held values.

Furthermore, there are similar descriptions of limiting mechanisms recognised from across the sample. These limitations are however experienced differently, and this is clearly based on positionality. For officers, there are institutional practices, policies and individual people who restrict community empowerment. For community activists within the voluntary sector, limitations have a more profound and destructive impact. The different experiences of those operating outside and those within formal institutions are apparent. The people facing these barriers function from a position of relative powerlessness and operate outside formal statutory structures.

Accounts of obstacles to empowerment<sup>39</sup> are experienced differently by those working outside formal structures than by those within. Once again, the effect of officers' and activists' different positions within the greater scheme of things directly affects the nature, type and degree of obstruction to community empowerment. Whilst some have elected to move on personally or professionally, others have persisted, attempting to tackle any barriers. In this case, there are strategies evident that have been developed in order to overcome these blocks. These are developed differently by the diverse actors, some adapting subtle changes to policy and practice, others promoting direct action and developing alternative strategies, whilst others strive to balance the competing tensions, seeking compromise and promoting creative solutions to community empowerment<sup>40</sup>.

Questions about routes to empowerment generated the most discussion, as across the board, all participants wanted to share the ways they and their organisation seek to empower. All describe opportunities that they found or created, illustrating optimism and resolve in both identifying and utilising methods to influence decision-making. From diverse sectors, coming from different perspectives, working from within and from outside the system, participants show a wide range of ways to impact on practice and process. Their various roles and positions clearly affect the strategies adopted, as well as their feasibility and effectiveness. Those with least influence may simply raise concerns at a local level, whereas the most influential have the potential to impact on national and international affairs.

The tangible experience of becoming more powerful is described by all, although empowerment is clearly felt differently by different actors, and there is also evidence of disillusionment and cynicism. For frontline professionals supporting community empowerment, the experience is 'second hand', whereas for members of the community the benefits are felt directly and personally. The difference in scale is also apparent. Those connected to global issues have an international perspective which they translate into a neighbourhood context, whilst those with national agendas bring these agendas into the local arena, and those coming from

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<sup>39</sup> Barriers to empowerment will be examined in depth in chapter 10.

<sup>40</sup> This will be analysed later through the different routes found in given and taken spaces in chapter 8

a neighbourhood level address local concerns, but often informed by wider arenas. These cross-cutting influences slice across the people, positions and perspectives, affected by a complex array of factors. The reach and scale of experience varies, but this does not strictly relate to the actors' sectoral location.

The testimonies point to both similarities and differences across the sample, then. Differences between sectors lie in the areas of focus, the specialisms and the different arenas in which people operate. The impact of these differences should be acknowledged and addressed when empowerment is being tackled. The similarities can be found firstly in the desire to make a positive contribution, and secondly in the determination to create paths toward greater community involvement, influence and power. Equally, these shared aspirations should be developed as they could be a powerful resource when nurturing empowerment. Whilst I have also identified problems in the form of cynicism, for instance, as well as reference to disengagement, this research has highlighted where common aspirations across the sectors are evident. The findings reveals a more complex picture than the idea that the community sector stands in stark contrast to the statutory sector, and confirms my conclusion that instead there is common ground to be found. This research has exposed shared strands of thought that hold a potential key to innovative cross-sectoral solutions to entrenched divisions. It is this common ground that can form the foundation of positive partnerships where collaborations are sought to meet current empowerment opportunities.

## **Chapter 7**

### **Potentials**

**Conceptions of power**

**Personal power**



## **Conceptions of power**

The different ways the urban actors conceptualise power is key to the analysis of the research findings. This forms the core of the investigation, and it is against this analysis that I later evaluate how their understanding influences their practice, and whether their perspective has changed with time and experience (Chapter 12). Here we also discover the points where the evidence emerging from my research complements or contradicts the theoretical positions laid out in the literature review, and where my original contributions emerge. Beginning with views concerning power, the chapter concludes with the significance of personal power.

This chapter illustrates differing ideas about power. It also demonstrates the ways people's views fail to fit neatly into particular models; they are not necessarily overt and they are dynamic. On the basis of the interviews there is evidence of explicit, but more frequently implicit, references to different models of power which can be identified through their reflections. There are cases of Marxist perspectives viewing structural inequality and economic power as central. There are also examples of reflections that would seem to fit with Gramsci's and Freire's analyses of power. Others, in contrast, relate more directly to Foucault's model, with more fluid analyses of power, illustrating these by reference to the power relations involved when small organisations struggle against larger ones – or where more personal aspects of power relationships emerge. It has become evident however, that these correlations are not complete or straightforward, and instead participants provide examples of elements drawn from different schools of thought, perspectives that also evolve through time and circumstance.

The degree that participants refer to notions of power and empowerment varies, although everyone describes the ways they understand power at some point in their interview, either directly or indirectly. For some, direct references are made to the notion of power, to theoretical models and schools of thought; whilst others simply describe experiences and opinions that can be recognised as fitting within a particular paradigm. From another perspective, I observe and analyse the models

of power and its enactment. Relating the wealth of literature on power to the wealth of experience that has been exposed during this research has revealed complexity. Evidence shows that the different ways of conceptualising power in the worlds of academia and in local governance do not always match up. The subject of power is evidently complex and depends on one's position and viewpoint, and is consequently perceived of variously. What follows is an analysis of these conceptions.

As a powerful black woman who has consciously and critically developed her career, Naomi's role within the Race Equality Council targets the very inequalities that form the basis of the U.K.'s historically divided society. Her personal and political perspective demonstrates her understanding of the evolution of systems of control and power in society. She is concerned that past inequalities are still not being tackled and until these are addressed, discrimination and marginalisation will continue to thrive. She refers to the social structures that ensure that power remains in the hands of the powerful, as well as the personal factors involved. Naomi illustrates this with examples from education, politics and policing where she describes the perpetuation of inequality through institutionalised attitudes and practices.

“So the authority structures of the police and education, they need to be able to allow young people into the core decision-making structures of education to be able to understand and address the issues that are arising. But that isn't happening...” (Naomi)

The way procedures and systems negatively impact on communities is a concern for Naomi. She describes the harmful effects of public policy and the need to think it through **with** the communities they affect and get to the root of inequality.

“I think that what we need to do is look at those areas that have really been compared with New Orleans<sup>41</sup> and really dig down and look at what has caused this. It's got to be public policy.” (Naomi)

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<sup>41</sup> Naomi refers to the natural and man-made disaster triggered by Hurricane Katrina in 2005. In particular the lack of investment into the social and physical infrastructure of the poor, predominantly black neighbourhoods.

Naomi sees the workings of structure and agency, hegemony and coercion. She is concerned with the lack of power sharing in the U.K. and the way that traditional power relations are impenetrable, inflexible and unequal. The U.K. experience is one of entrenched divisions for Naomi.

“Politicians - no matter what we try and shape, they don’t listen to us. The power is with the politicians in Great Britain. And that is sad. The thing is we’ve got the democratic process. That’s fine. But it’s how it’s implemented, how it’s shared, how it’s opened out. How politicians and the political structures are able to influence decision-making structures on the ground in an innovative way. And that’s not happening... If it’s not representative of your country that means you are not addressing the key issues that affect those communities on the ground that you are providing money to serve. They are not receiving vital, vital service provision because politicians are not in touch with the local communities. The local councillors don’t represent Ealing... One black councillor: it’s disgusting!” (Naomi)

Naomi holds a long-term perspective, arguing that historical inequalities are so entrenched and protected that there has been very little real change over the centuries, and she foresees very little likelihood of real change in the future. Naomi’s perspective is structuralist in nature, and displaying Marxist features.

“Power and money. Power and money. Power, money, class and race. That’s what’s at the centre. Without power you can’t have money. You can’t. In what we are talking about: you got to be white, and you got to be male, and you got to be middle-class. You’ll never break it, not in our lifetime, not in our kid’s lifetime, maybe in their kid’s lifetime it may break it. No change through time. None at all. You can’t have 36 boroughs and have one black man as a chief exec. It doesn’t make any sense.” (Naomi)

The significance of the relativity of power, structural constraints and the effect of these on different actors is stressed by Mayo and Taylor (2001: p.40) and is relevant to Naomi’s view that imbalances in power result in the perpetuation of discrimination. Structural constraints impact on the relative experience of power.

The meeting of unequal partners and the biased results generated are a concern across the board, with many highlighting this disparity as a major barrier to empowerment. Naomi notably emphasises power imbalances as calculated, controlling and a core reason behind the perpetuation of inequality.

Lukes' (1986: p.5) holds a structuralist position overall, whilst stating that 'to have power is to be able to make a difference to the world' which is mirrored by the aspirations of many of those interviewed. Representatives from education, the police and service providers working at a grassroots level recognise their role in promoting the exercise of community choice and change. This view also fits with Luke's identification of the power to set the agenda and shape desires, an approach that can also be seen in the founding principles of the performance poet in particular, whose approach to education and empowerment is about firstly having a vision.

Sam's position within a large housing association is structured in such a way as to clearly delineate the hierarchies of power. He sees power lying outside his jurisdiction and located within the government via the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, the Housing Corporation, the Government Office for London, the local authority, MPs and at a senior level in the R.S.L. organisation. Like others in this research, understanding these parameters and working within these constraints is the way that Sam attempts to satisfy corporate **and** community interests. Sam questions the electoral, party-political system and suggests flaws in democracy creating an un-representative governing body. He also questions the lack of imagination in not adopting alternative forms of governance rooted in historically and culturally embedded systems.

"And I think that's kind of a white, Anglo-Saxon kind of approach to things. I do wonder whether there are other cultures that have better systems, or systems that may generally be more effective or better. But we never adopt those, we never try those. But it would be interesting. Some of the African kinds of models of participation." (Sam)

Sam needs to balance the contradictions of policies promoting privatisation that disempower the public, with involvement of the public as consumers of services, juggling these conflicting priorities.

Charlie's views have clearly been shaped by his experience in the police force, but also by his perception of the flaws within the establishment. He acknowledges the way perceptions of power have changed over the years such that it has been associated with different factors: from political movements, to money, to knowledge. Seeing this transformation in society he describes the changing emphasis on what power means, and how this translates in practice.

“So I think knowledge is power. That old phrase is very relevant. I think what has happened is there has been generation (*i.e. change*) in the way that society has shifted, where knowledge hasn't been power. Other things have been power. I mean, some people might say that in the eighties, money was power. Probably was. In the seventies, the Trade Unions had the power. You know, there are all sorts of things you could tag as to where the power lies. But increasingly I think you have to have the knowledge and the credibility, and the look, the sheen, to go with that. In order to present the particular argument in an intelligent, informed way that people can't really argue with you. I think we've got more sophisticated is probably what I'm trying to say.” (Charlie)

The Sure Start project that Sinéad has been involved with (as a user, parent representative and independent organisation worker) is on the brink of being mainstreamed, and has therefore provided particular insights into the way that power functions. She has seen the programme transform from community / parent led and empowering local people to being consumed within the mainstream. This has given sustainability on the one hand but at the expense of the community-led approach. Making sense of changes in policy and power dynamics has informed Sinéad's practice and conception of power such that she works within the local authority confines to provide a service that nonetheless meets the needs of local parents. Responding to national directives, addressing local targets and adjusting

to changes in policy, Sinéad has a clear sense of the evolution of power over time and the effects of context on empowerment.

“At the very big conference where the power shift happened to the local authority there were huge protests from many programmes around the country. One of the best points that was raised was by a group from Salford who said ‘Why is it that when something’s going really well, that you hand it over to organisations who in National Audit terms have been proved to be bad in management and leadership?’ And it was this crazy handing over of power to someone that hasn’t managed power at all in the past. No track record to do it well. Why do that? Why throw away something that’s going well? ... But no, there’s a big power shift and the justification is slightly dodgy.” (Sinéad)

The different scale projects that Sinéad has been involved with illustrate her views on the way that power is played out locally. The nationally driven, large-scale, top-down, politically motivated programmes remain impenetrable, whilst the small-scale, local projects permit community input. She sees and describes power operating differently in global and local spaces. Here, understanding the framework within which the disempowered can function and knowing the opportunities that can be exploited are central to Sinéad’s understanding and approach to empowerment.

“With buildings and capital, it’s just been one long power struggle. Power influences decisions... But if it’s something that the powerful aren’t that bothered about the outcome, then... It depends on how important the outcome is I think. If it’s just a little service and something that just affects a small amount of people, the powerful aren’t interested, they aren’t interested in the decisions around it, and they aren’t interested in influencing it. But if it’s a major building going into a housing estate that is in the middle of their big power struggle then they heavily influence those decisions. So it’s what the final outcome would be affects the level of interest of power seems to be in correlation ... But when you start treading on things that are central to

government policy, then you have little to no power. It would seem.”  
(Sinéad)

The democratic function of the local authority informs Dillan’s ways of conceptualising power – although he is also aware of structural constraints. As a long-standing planning officer within the London Borough of Ealing, Dillan understands and operates within the local authority framework, balancing the demands of the economy and democratic accountability.

“My organisation is intended to represent the community. That’s the whole purpose of there being local councils: to represent the views and the needs of the people who live in the area in particular, but also the people who would visit and who would work in the area as well. And that’s based on a democratic system...” (Dillan)

Dillan’s role within local government demonstrates an appreciation of the mechanisms of power and influence. He has a fairly pragmatic understanding of the systems of democracy and decision-making. He emphasises the role of economic and political motivations in global and local decision-making. Despite his attempts to balance priorities and include community perspectives in planning decisions, the weight of market forces and traditional practices are factors to be reckoned with, and which he grapples with.

“And so in a sense this corporate approach to decision-making does mean that you are bringing people with a lot of power into the decision chamber. And so there’s a continuing process of negotiation and ducking and weaving really, as to what sort of decision is taking place. Now concurrently with that of course is the bringing in of the community, which is powerful in a democratic sense.” (Dillan)

Dillan focuses on balancing democratic principles and these powerful forces. He understands the way government works, where power lies, what influences decision-making and the mechanisms that impact on civic engagement. Dillan’s conception of the multi-dimensional nature of power fits in some ways with

Gramsci's (1971) model of power as a relationship spread through civil society and the state, with the interaction of leadership and domination across different sites. Although Dillan has an essentially pluralist view of power, he nonetheless recognises some of these structural implications, then.

“...one could say that the regulatory power and the executive power that the council has, although they are pretty powerful, are only there to influence the much bigger players: the multinational companies, the national government, the Mayor of London's office, which have got even bigger multi-million pound budgets to spend. One would hope that certainly national government and the Mayor of London's Office, being democratically elected organisations will be benign. And one would hope that the business multinationals who are spending their money would be as aligned as possible to people's market needs.” (Dillan)

Alliances built in a shifting and dynamic space in the 'war of position' is how Gramsci (1971: p.170) analyses power relations. His notion of power is complex and pluri-centred in contemporary society with cultural, intellectual, moral and ideological dimensions. Gramsci identifies leadership, authority and domination interacting across different sites. This aspect of Gramsci's approach is described by many, acknowledging the different dynamics of power and their interaction. Acton Gardening Association, Pupil Parent Partnership, Acton Community Forum, E.R.E.C. and S.A.R.A.G. representatives in particular described this multi-dimensional nature of power.

In parallel, Donald's role with the Housing Arms Length Management Organisation impacts upon his view of hierarchies of power. His understanding is based on the changes he has seen in government policy and professional practice, and the way these have shifted power dynamics in relation to tenants, officers and auditors. The framework is clear overall, however, his role within this is also clear, described in a matter-of-fact way.

“We're accountable to the council who still have a role in monitoring what we do. The council obviously pays us a fee to manage their stock, so they have



to keep track of it, making sure they are getting value for money. We're accountable to our tenants and residents as well. ... we have to be inspected by the Audit Commission regularly to keep up the standard we achieved last year," (Donald)

Donald sees tenants' increased assertion and confidence linked to their experience as consumers of housing services. Concern is raised in this research, however, that the shift from democratic rights to rights based on consumer culture undermines empowerment.

A psycho-social interpretation of power as having the potential to mentally and physically control people - where they are free and not free at the same time - is described by Foucault (1980: p.198). Officers and activists also understand this relativity of power, experienced within and between people. For example, Bari founded and leads an organisation that provides behavioural support for disaffected and marginalised young people. He knows what is required to influence and make change but is encumbered by the structural constraints of small organisations.

"I think we all have the power to shape the debate. It's getting a big enough voice to do it, it's getting enough agreement to do it which is the big problem. ... I mean we don't get many opportunities to hang out and to thrash through problems because we're so busy trying to keep the organisation afloat for the main part." (Bari)

Bari understands the interplay of the personal and the political, seeing the need for reflection and mutual consideration when seeking empowerment. The centrality of relationships and the dynamics of power in this process are stressed. Foucault's psycho-social interpretation of power with the potential to subjugate people mentally and physically is therefore relevant to Bari's thinking. His frustration at impenetrable and inflexible systems of control is evident as he tries to introduce innovative ways of thinking and working. Despite experiencing obstructions, Bari continues to envisage, demonstrate and practice alternative models of power with a socio-psychological foundation that deals with the whole person. Ledwith's

identification of the need to engage in critical debate and address systems of control is essential for empowerment, participation and equality and is evident in Bari's thinking. "Informed by anti-discriminatory analysis, and in a symbiotic process of action and reflection, critical analysis deepens in relation to practical experience." (2005: p.1). The need for conscious reflection is identified as necessary for working with excluded young people, emphasising how essential reflexive practice is to his work and the young people he works with.

"So what you can gain using those relationships, reflecting and reflexive practice is huge. To undertake it is something else. Not everybody wants to do it. ... and that's hard because I'm not prepared to continue with this relationship if you're not going to try and do what we want. There's a sort of hard side to it. You've got to really believe this and you've got to do it. You can't just talk the talk. You've actually got to put in the hours; you've got to feel the pain sometimes and the uncertainty of 'Oh my God, I really did mess up' and it doesn't feel comfortable at all, and you've got to understand why that was and why it won't happen again, or how you can control it happening less perhaps." (Bari)

A differing – and more pragmatic, although equally rooted approach emerges from the South Acton Resident Action Group. Although initially set up with the support of the local authority housing department's Residents Participation Unit, the ethos and manifesto of S.A.R.A.G is very much collective in nature and following socialist principles. The organisation has evolved over time, responding to its members' vision and pursuing creative solutions that have led to their transformation into a Tenant Management Organisation. This development demonstrates the way that the organisation has retained its socialist ideology whilst adapting to the opportunities of the changing political context within which they operate. This can be seen in their perspective, ways of communicating, areas of work and priorities.

"First of all, we take the view that the estate should be opened up. And that would be the work we did with the University of Westminster. And we came up with the ten points, a kind of manifesto as to how that should be done. Not just how we'd do it physically, but it also focuses on metaphorically, you

know what I mean, to really end the kind of, I use the term 'Bantustan status' of the neighbourhood." (Khenan)

Very much people and neighbourhood led, S.A.R.A.G. is also very aware of the national framework within which they operate. Khenan has a deep understanding of notions of power, describing cultural and historical power dynamics, as well as his view of the spin and hypocrisy that he associates with policies around empowerment and devolution. This perspective tallies with a structuralist analysis whilst evolving a more nuanced response to the changing context.

"Because it is not only that the powerful are paying lip-service to change and to the distribution of power. Because if you read the statements that Tony Blair made from the moment he came to power you would think that this country could be transformed. But it hasn't happened, it simply hasn't happened because culturally power comes down. Power is not actually something that moves upwards and power is not to be shared. Quite frankly, historically, people have acculturated to the way in which we are buffered, to the way in which we live our life and so forth. When you say 'Well look here, we want to change that.' They don't even take you seriously. That's the beginning. They do not believe that you mean it." (Khenan)

Khenan's life experience and political awareness has informed the evolution of his conscious and holistic approach to empowerment. He does not just see the limited and local, he also maintains a global perspective. Rather than being restricted to the South Acton Estate tenants there is reference to national campaigns and international cooperative movements. Khenan has made a point of being involved in and visiting examples of community-led initiatives in London, around the U.K. and internationally. He points out that the local authority is publicly owned and as such should respond to residents' needs. Khenan is, however, critical of a system that has consistently failed to deliver over decades, and sees flaws in the electoral system's ability to rectify this, recommending instead, tenant management.

“...people say that it is a democratic process, it’s a democratic invention. Because the council is publicly owned. Yes it is publicly owned. So you can always change it if you are not happy with the way that they’re being managed. But that hasn’t proved correct for forty years! It isn’t true. So why you believe that by simply changing your councillors round there’s going to be change. What this school says...all you need to do is keep it under the management of the council, and make sure that the people who are paid to do their work, do their job. Well people haven’t succeeded in doing it for forty years, so why do they believe they’re going to get them to do their jobs. ... having done the Options Survey and looked at the whole thing, we quite frankly would go for the Right to Manage.” (Khenan)

The Marxist model linking economic and political power is evident in Khenan’s analysis. However, his view has been modified over time, as S.A.R.A.G. is open to new approaches, taking them beyond the limitations of a structural conflict approach. Khenan does not restrict himself to an inadequate structuralist account of power. Rather, he describes routes where people become aware, conscious and come together to initiate change.

“Take a decision that they want to have change. They become conscious. They become alert to the fact that something has to change. And so you get people collectively deciding that we are going to change. And you win as much support as possible. And it is as a result of a process of that kind that you get change. They make whatever they want to make.” (Khenan)

The role of S.A.R.A.G. is to help people to realise their strength and power, in his view. This empowering role aims to build confidence and take control. The relationships between the state and civil society are described where changes in the location, regulation and circulation of power are central to empowerment.

“But the whole thing is actually to lead the process so that people become empowered! That’s the thing! It’s happening at the moment. What we have always said to people is: it’s not a matter that you are going to have a Resident’s Management organisation in 2007. You are doing it. It’s actually

happening. Every step, every project, every move that you make, every meeting that you attend, and every resolution that you pass ... in other words, it is not seen like that. But the truth is that people started exercising or empowering themselves in fact nine years ago. From the time that they actually came together and set up this organisation, they started unconsciously to empower themselves. And that is happening.” (Khenan)

Khenan believes that change is only possible when people consciously decide to take control and change their mental and physical condition. He understands that it is as a result of this process that transformation occurs, and that the only time things happen is when people actively decide that they want change, and join with others in solidarity.

Power can be achieved through involvement and participation where opportunities for political engagement emerge from leadership developed in community-based organisations. McArdle’s (1989) reference to empowerment as participation in decision-making by the people who live with the consequences is relevant. Having clarity of purpose and an appreciation of power as a concept, Khenan highlights his vision of the empowerment process and the path to consciousness.

“Power is... the whole process is really to help people to recognise that.... they have power, that they have more power than they assume. That’s the whole process really. That’s really it. ... But the whole thing is actually to lead the process so that people become empowered.” (Khenan)

Evidence of social action can be seen in Acton. This action is perceived as the site of political empowerment through consciousness, active participation, decision-making, communication, conflict and agency. The transformative politics of citizenship, social movements, participation in the public arena and concerted action can result in empowerment. Khenan and the residents’ action group begin by encouraging residents to believe that alternatives are possible, and through these early engagements, instigate the process. Others also believe in this approach, all of whom actively work towards the devolution and the sharing of power. These alternative forms of social, cultural, political and global collective

action are seen as a politics of power that is offered as an alternative to a politics of domination that is evident in the area of study.

Taylor's (2003: p.121) view of power as dynamic and pervasive provides opportunities for intervention and assertion. Her policy and practice focus reveals that power can be shared and negotiated in the governance model. Power emerging from participation and partnership has the potential to open up new political and public spaces. This point is shared by frontline officers and activists alike. The changing context of governance has opened up new ways of thinking, working and relating that enable empowerment opportunities for those able to adapt, whilst heralding the demise of those unwilling to move with the times. The notion of negotiable, shared power and the creation of opportunities to engage and effect change are central to my research and have been born out through testimonies of activists and professionals described here. The illustrations demonstrate ways that individuals adopt strategies and exploit opportunities that redefine and reorganise power dynamics.

The majority of research participants describe the fluidity of power, and knowledge as power. Although not fitting neatly into any one model, their stories reveal perceptions of power as something accessible and available. A more pluralist approach that works for Ahmed is described. As a politician who has consciously and actively built his ability to participate in the democratic political structures and system, Ahmed's view is relatively transparent and has the most straight forward understanding of power. He explains the political structure in the U.K., the role of democracy, the way that the system addresses representation and the path he has cut in order to empower himself and the communities he represents. Ahmed has a very clear view of how to gain voice and influence. His political activism and engagement with democratic processes demonstrate his beliefs, approach to politics and his understanding of how power works. For Ahmed direct engagement with mainstream politics is the most effective route to influencing decision-making.

“The reason I joined the Labour Party was because I knew from my work with other organisations that the only way your voice could be heard was you should be with the mainstream.” (Ahmed)

The need to understand how the system works is highlighted as vital if people wish to make it work for them. For some, penetration of the mainstream is the only way to make real progress, and relates to Cornwall's analysis of given and taken spaces. Ahmed's life and political commitment is centred on accessing power and the ability to influence through active involvement in the political process. For him power is achieved through engaging fully in the democratic system and having a say on international, national and local affairs.

“Really we don't have that power. We are organisations like pressure groups. We do what we can. But at the end of the day we don't really have power. The real power, if we talk locally, it is with the local authority. We just try to influence. That's why I encourage the local community to join the political system, to be part of the political system, rather than me asking the councillor what to do on my behalf. I want me to become a councillor, to do for my community what is necessary to be done, sitting at the same table as the decision-makers. That's where I want to reach. It's the same thing with the Arab Labour Group, nationally. I would like to see members of the Arab community become members of the House of Commons. To sit in the House of Commons and raise the issues that the Arabs are concerned about: **in** the House of Commons, **by** British Arabs. Instead of asking others to represent me, I want to be represented ourselves. This is what my organisation works for: that the power should be in the hands of the people to represent themselves.” (Ahmed)

Ahmed firmly believes in democratic principles and the need for diverse communities to actively engage and initiate change, having a pluralist model of democracy. He acknowledges the shortcomings of this model, nonetheless he believes political representation is the best way to influence affairs.

“The only way to be able to achieve that is by making Arabs aware of the need to join the political establishment, to be able to be represented at the local level at the council, and to be represented at the national level.”  
(Ahmed)

His concern is for accessible and inclusive processes and for diverse voices to be heard via the democratic system. Whilst believing in the potential for democratic engagement and empowerment in Britain, however, his beliefs have been seriously challenged by the difficulties of making an impact on policies over the Iraq War. He recognises the limitations of power, but understands how it operates in local and global spaces.

The existence of structures and rules around the acquisition of power are described by Charlotte. Working within the education sector she acknowledges the presence of hierarchies and highlights the potential to bring about change through reflective practice. In particular she references the notion of power as fluid and achievable through building social capital, which is evident in the writing of Foucault (1980: p.95) and Freire (1970: p.67). She describes the interaction of social forces and the achievement of power.

“Access to power. It’s belonging, being a member of that set. How do you join? You’ve got to be similar, you’ve got to get on board, you can’t be an outsider and if you are too different, then it’s hard to get into the organisation, isn’t it.” (Charlotte)

Charlotte clearly identifies the structures she operates within, referencing the broad frameworks and systems that impact on decision-making and the attainment of power. She also highlights the importance of understanding this context, the need to have vision and make considered decisions.

“So all that decision-making is within a context and framework, which is your knowledge and understanding of the situation you’re in, the people that you’re working with, the vision of the job that needs to be done, the strategies that are coming down, anywhere from L.E.A. or local authority, to Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, Department for Education and Science, and Department of



Health. It's all in that context and framework. The more you understand about that and what influences the decisions, and hopefully makes them sound decisions." (Charlotte)

Charlotte makes sense of power as something that can be embraced and shared. She particularly identifies the way that power is used and experienced, reminiscent of Foucault (1980: p.98) and Bourdieu's (1998: p.33) view of a power woven into society. Her use of concepts such as the benign cycle and social capital demonstrate her comprehension and vision of society and its academic analysis.

"...it's the social capital thing... it's the benign cycle, it's the motivation that then allows something else to happen, and those new emerging leaders to have the power to share the power with yet another group of people. The benign cycle...." (Charlotte)

Making time to reflect, Youth and Connexions officer Sally considers her practice and the ways power is played out in the local authority and community contexts. This approach in itself is empowering for Sally, acknowledging her weaknesses, addressing them and utilising her strengths to influence change within her particular operational context. The centrality of self-awareness, knowledge and vision informs her life and work practices. This conscious appreciation and approach keeps Sally clear about her role, systemic forces and constraints, and ways to create opportunities within these parameters.

"I am their strongest link. It is a powerful thing. I did a session of non-managerial supervision...and some of those realisations and insights are really useful. Because I kind of knew it, but knowing it and actually thinking what you're going to do with it are two different things. Having a more solid knowledge that actually you're really quite powerful and that I can shape decisions, but actually I need to continue to find more creative ways to make it real." (Sally)

Evidence from a cross-section of actors from different sectors has indeed revealed belief in the potential for transformation at the micro and macro levels. Belief in

the transformation of personal and community circumstances is apparent from reflections on access to education, the assertion of rights or through contributing to positive changes locally, or indeed nationally. Freire focuses on the will and ability to transform circumstances which is mirrored in the reflections of representatives from education, business and politics.

Power woven into society affecting the way we perceive and experience it and operating through culture, identity and life style is explored by Foucault (1980: p.194) and Bourdieu (1998: pp.303-308) amongst others. Naomi, Sean and Charlotte particularly identify these diverse ways that power is used and experienced. Power is described as something that flows by these education and community sector representatives, perhaps as their work is focused on generating opportunities for empowerment and exploring openings for personal and community development. Foucault sees power spread over all relationships, particularly linking knowledge with power, which also fits with these actors' views on education, training and capacity building as routes to empowerment. This perspective is shared by community activists where the rules of engagement are established and agendas reflect the internalisation of values, ideology and worldview. Reviewing these perspectives on power I appreciate its complexity alongside the ability to utilise various aspects of different models of power. This adaptable approach to power responds to the challenging contemporary conditions.

Power is understood differently by the diverse actors. **It** has emerged that these differences are not tied to their relative positions. Power is identified as functioning in global and local spaces, concerned with structure and agency. There is confirmation of hegemony and coercion in the testimonies, but also of power understood as dynamic and reinforced through cultural reproduction. Some reference power played out through political debate and communication, whilst others lay more emphasis on structural conflict and positionality. Among the sample there are examples of power experienced as fluid, relational and evident in values and identity (Foucault, 1980: p.194), whilst others highlight critical

consciousness and the power to transform (Freire, 2006: p.35). Theoretical and practical appreciations of power demonstrate where notions and experiences of power concur or conflict in the West London context. The actors utilise different models and analyses of power as they navigate through the shifting terrain of empowerment. In summary, as previously suggested, participants' comprehension of power is complex, multi-faceted and nuanced, not generally strictly fitting into any single model of power. I suggest that this complexity and fluidity has the adaptability needed to respond to the constantly changing socio-political environment.

## Personal power

Before concluding this discussion of differing perceptions of power it is important to include some reference to those who focus upon the links between the personal, the political **and** beyond to further dimensions. For some (notably Efia and Mahamad discussed below), the holistic approach which unites the personal, political and spiritual is at the centre of their focus and locates power as contributing to personal and spiritual development.

As a political-cultural activist and educator Efia has a perception of power that has evolved from her experience of having access to it denied, fighting from a position of marginalisation, to consciousness and finally to empowering others. Efia conceives of power in a way that self- and political-awareness go hand-in-hand. Her appreciation of broad concerns is informed by her private experience of the issue.

“I really love embracing that term ‘the personal is political.’ ... I think the two are inextricably linked. So, somewhere along the line everything I’ve done, the personal has informed what I have done and the politics has had an impact on me as person.” (Efia)

Efia also relates economic and political trends to corresponding social and cultural expressions. This frame of reference helps Efia make sense of her politicisation and activism, charting her development and empowerment over time.

“So again, the political begins to impact on the personal. And for me as a person, I had to relocate<sup>42</sup>. [*I had to understand*] what was going on in my life and see whether the support systems were out there. ... the politics does impact upon how you can be active.” (Efia)

Absolutely central to Efia is the potential of education and knowledge to the development of a person, of a community. The barriers she has faced and overcome in education and in life have provided a stimulus to support the consciousness raising and empowerment of others. As a result, Efia continues to

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<sup>42</sup> Efia refers to a difficult time in her life where the political and personal converged dramatically.

study, is politically active, and is involved with empowering organisations and through her performance poetry inspires others through formal and informal educational settings. Efia explicitly references Marx (1867), whilst Freire's (1970) model of empowerment is also pertinent, but perhaps most significantly she refers to the perspective of Garvey<sup>43</sup> (1937) in terms of Black organisation and achievement.

Efia believes that there are always two-sides to every situation, where the opposite side of freedom is oppression, of peace is conflict, of enlightenment is confusion. Having reflected on her own initially negative experiences of education, she moved to an awareness of how to make it work for her and others. Efia questions the underachievement of black youths and seeks to support their success and is motivated by her belief and vision.

"You have to believe that education will change your life. But it can oppress you too, because of the system and those who aren't willing to allow you. But if you want to change anything you have to believe that change is possible. And you have to be prepared to make changes with very little."  
(Efia)

Efia reflects on why things are the way they are, considers the impact of political trends, factors in cultural concerns and addresses equalities issues in her analysis. This approach, evolving from her personal and political experiences, influences her understanding of power and empowerment. Efia confronts historical inequalities that continue to impact on current practices that fail to tackle equalities issues. She expresses frustration at this continuing disjuncture between what needs to change and practices on the ground.

"I think it's still failing people because of the system. The education system is made up of people that are not always willing to embrace difference. I mean things are moving fast. We are hearing conversations. I mean we've learnt about equal opportunities in the 70's and the 80's, but obviously it depends on who's defining. ... You can throw as much money as you can

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<sup>43</sup> "I do not speak carelessly or recklessly but with a definite object of helping the people, especially those of my race, to know, to understand, and to realise themselves." (Garvey, Halifax, Nova Scotia, 1937)

into councils, the policies can, as you well know... But if the will's not there, and then if the money's not there, if it's not being used effectively...you're wasting your time, you are going round in circles you see. Because at the end of the day, I know I'm being cautious because we know that nationally, African-Caribbean children...are still under-achieving. You hear statistics that will say 'Oh this particular group of females are doing really well. Or, as a group, you know...' But nationally they are still lagging behind. Which type of African-Caribbean children? Those with class issues. So what's that about? What's that about?" (Efia)

The need to confront inequality is fundamental to empowerment for Efia and is central to her way of thinking. She begins with translating the personal into the political, utilising the power within to bring about change without, and embracing the grassroots experience and knowledge to bring about equality of opportunity in the mainstream.

"Oh it's very important in policy and political work. And it has to be born out of grassroots experience of ordinary people." (Efia)

Mahamad also connects the personal with the political in his analysis of power. He has a clear perspective on the issues of empowerment based on his consideration of direct experience, the needs of the community he serves and the wider influencing issues. Mahamad is well aware of the problems of racism and discrimination. Debates around terrorism, globalisation, questions of religion, education, housing, immigration and crime all affect people's private life experiences but are profoundly political in nature. Mahamad appreciates the global and the local, and the ways that power is played out at international and neighbourhood levels, bringing the globalisation debate alive in the large and small scale.

"As I said, we are a...fairly new organisation but we do concern with wider issues. We do concern in two ways, for example what happens to the community. Everything has an impact with the community and it has an impact with ourselves. Like for example issues to do with racism and

discrimination and issues to do with accessing...or getting the right information. That also has an impact on our organisation. And on the other hand, getting sustainable funding is a major issue for us ... the wider issues the community has that we share are the same because of the same background and the same things we have. If it's to do with terrorism, if it's to do with religion." (Mahamad)

Ultimately, Mahamad's view about power is that knowledge is important and that this is guided by spirituality. This perspective introduces the power of spirituality, which sheds a different light on the debates about power.

"Power is not the heart. I think knowledge is the heart I would say. ... And this also goes back into my experience into other issues relating to spiritualism. Because in a sense knowledge is not enough for making decisions, of whether you have power or don't have power. ... The knowledge that we need is spirit controlled, guides the way. So if the spirit is spoiled, the knowledge will become problematic." (Mahamad)

The combination of the spirit with knowledge and power equates to 'paradise' for Mahamad. His views link with Kothari's (2001: p.141) perception of power informing understanding, social and cultural practices. The way Mahamad thinks, the way he works and the bridging role of his organisation are based on his appreciation of power, such that the Tallo Information Centre forms a link between the community and the local authority. This conception fits with a view of power flowing through society with a key role for a translating organisation with knowledge that links both worlds.

Understanding the role of education in empowerment is also of great importance to Mahamad. For him education produces the next generation of leaders, and the lack of an education reduces the chances of accessing power. This holistic appreciation of power is central to attaining influence and is something Mahamad personally, politically and consistently strives towards on behalf of the community he supports.

In summary, the different models of power described in the literature show the complexity of the subject, as well as the links between personal and political opinions. I have related the literature to local understanding and experiences of power, testing its application to my case study. There are parallels as well as differences of opinion; there are illustrations that support the models and others that reveal their limitations. There is contradiction as well as agreement. It is apparent that some respondents have a clearer understanding and analysis of power than others. Some follow a structural conflict approach, whilst others prefer a dynamic model of power. I have identified emerging patterns and highlighted the significance of these to my thesis. Despite the different degrees of clarity of analysis and purpose amongst participants, a common feature is evident, and that is the importance of the ability to understand, adapt and adjust to changing circumstances and context. This characteristic has emerged as a major finding of this research and indicates an important mechanism for making sense of and acquiring power. The frameworks used to understand power dynamics and how to operate effectively within them may vary, however what **is** significant is the consciousness to reflect and respond to changing circumstances and new spaces for engagement. What is also clear is the fact that there are no simple formulas and trajectories. Rather, what I have identified and seems to be emerging is a more flexible, adaptable and reflexive understanding of power.



## **Chapter 8**

### **Given and taken spaces**

**Outsider strategies**

**Insider reflections**

**Bridging roles**

## **Outsider strategies**

This chapter looks at influence and the various empowerment strategies utilised by the research participants. The diverse practical routes to power are assessed here, their characteristics considered and successful strategies identified. Here I examine evidence of Cornwall (2007: p.10), and Gaventa and Cornwall's (2001: p.32) given and taken spaces, and transformation from different perspectives and approaches. The following sections analyse evidence of insider, outsider and bridging perspectives and strategies. Across the sectors the identification of effective routes to influence is apparent. The role of bridging / brokering individuals and organisations is highlighted as playing an important enabling and empowering function, and will be examined in more depth subsequently. But first, 'outsider' strategies and opportunities to influence are illustrated below.

Influencing transformation for those operating outside powerful domains begins with personal strategies such as the centrality of self-confidence and self-belief which are identified as the starting point for transformation. Personal characteristics identified as useful assets are critical awareness, focus and determination. Neighbourhood worker Earl for example, describes the importance of confidence for those aspiring to effect change, pointing out the need for personal and community development alongside neighbourhood redevelopment.

"Self-esteem will always change people, or influence people's attitudes, their ways of thinking or behaviour. That's a result you can see working: this individual, or this group of individuals change for the better. So if people start to show confidence, take responsibility and see the before and after, it's the most tangible way of seeing self-esteem. Because I firmly believe that if people believe in themselves they perform better, they behave better and they produce more. It covers all of us. When we feel good and full of energy and bounce, we feel we can lift up the world. We know we can't, but we'll have a go. Those kind of differences also have an impact on the wider community and the wider environment, because no matter how much... whether it's central or local government, physical or environmental change

to the infrastructure. If the people are not ready for that then we'll be right back to square one. It's a two edged sword. While you're dealing with the physical, you have to deal with the people, in terms of rejuvenating their lives as well. The two go hand-in-hand." (Earl)

Earl goes on to elaborate on key qualities of the powerful, feeling that empowerment can be enhanced by particular character traits and explaining that it's your personality that makes things happen. He describes the features that promote empowerment affecting the practices employed, which in turn affects perspective.

"Leadership is the thing for me. There are three different areas: management, decision-making, leadership. All are wrapped up in power, and it's entirely up to that individual how they make that work for the organisation, or the good of the people. ... Leadership and decision-making are the most important and can influence all the rest of it. Without it you just run around in circles." (Earl)

Knowledge and critical understanding are stressed in relation to being able to take advantage of opportunities. Education, learning from experiences and skill are cited as routes to empowerment and effective pathways to personal development and greater control of one's life circumstances. The benefits afforded by giving people the chance to develop and use their expertise are mentioned by activist Efiya for instance, as key to nurturing their positive contribution. She sees personal and community empowerment through formal and informal education as important to personal growth. This approach to empowerment through education and development mirrors Freire's 'conscientizacao' (1970: p.49) take on power.

"...if you involve me, if you give me the opportunity to speak, if you let me try and do something, use my skills in a different way, you are probably going to get the best out of me. Because I've learnt that myself. ...at the same time be creative and be willing to listen, because others may have more knowledge than you. You know what I'm saying?" (Efiya)

People recognise that feeling influential comes from being part of and seeing change. Concrete achievements create a real sense of power and attainment. For example, resident action group representative Khenan sees a clear path to empowerment starting with self-awareness, choosing to become powerful and taking control by building the collective power. Khenan is willing to share the benefits, even let Ealing Council take the credit, because for S.A.R.A.G. the key thing is to unite people and improve life in their neighbourhood.

“So therefore we have had to empower ourselves by simply acting, by winning collaboration, by winning the kind of solidarity, by joining the National Federation of T.M.O.’s and so forth. And we try to do a bit of coaxing and so forth, and to show Ealing. One of the things that we have tried to do with Ealing is to say ‘Look here; try to see this project not as Acton, not as S.A.R.A.G. Why can’t you see this as an experiment? You have never had an empowered neighbourhood in the borough. Why don’t you take it on and say this is Ealing’s achievement? If you want to earn a star you could take it on board, have it as part of the A.L.M.O., and make a thing of it.’ No! People. People who have power find it very difficult to share it.” (Khenan)

Activism is seen as the central route to power for Khenan and S.A.R.A.G. whose approach is clearly related to action and empowerment. As a residents group dealing with the fabric of people’s lives, their homes and neighbourhood is an important starting point for involvement and self-determination. S.A.R.A.G.’s awareness of the changing policy context and national agendas is characteristic of this outward looking collective.

“The point that we’re making in Acton now is that even if the council...were able to produce a three-star service for South Acton, we would still be moving towards self-governance. The point about it is: it isn’t something you do because it’s nice or a kind of whim. The simple fact about it is that it is necessary for community development; it is necessary for people to actually assert themselves and move towards self-determination. If you empower people... You start with housing, your home, the places where

you live. That's important and central to life. But if you start there, then of course the sky's the limit. The point about it is, self-governance is not just a matter of you want to pretty up the place and make it look a bit more tidy, and maybe you'll do better collection of the rent, and you'll spend it better than the bureaucrats in the town hall. The simple fact is that it is something that you start with in order to assert collective action and to look at how people can in fact govern themselves, you know. How people can in fact take control of their lives. We are being told at the moment to take control of our lives in terms of health and whatever it might be. There should be a totality about this. There is no reason why we should just assume that we should be dictated to and be managed. That's the thing, to remove the idea that people are to be managed." (Khenan)

Empowerment through 'outsider' strategies demonstrates a role for collective action and community involvement. Whether formally sanctioned or arising informally, collective challenges have the power to raise issues, put them on the agenda and demonstrate popular support. Tarrow (1998: p.76) suggests that even when they 'fail', they can initiate cultural, political, local and perhaps global change. The grassroots activists describe this phenomenon, where personal awareness has led to building collective support and the enactment of power struggles over contentious politics. Activists describe consciousness gained from this process that initiates empowerment and triggers subsequent action. Self-awareness and critical consciousness impact on the ability of actors to experience and understand, to reflect and act.

It is felt, particularly by the community representatives, that widespread involvement, unity and popular support are powerful tools in bringing about change, often through experiencing common issues and coming together to address constructive concerns. This commonality can be achieved through unifying activities and information sharing, which fits with analyses of community identity based on shared experiences. This route is discussed by the chair of a residents association who uses a variety of approaches to bring about a shared

understanding and vision, and then by working together to develop positive, resident-led activity and change. Jai emphasises the strategic role of the residents association whilst keeping inclusive and firmly embedded in the grassroots.

“As a tenants and residents association you try and do things more strategically, but also have some direct impact to the residents. And you try and engage your tenants and residents by having regular meetings, having a newsletter, having events to engage people. And also don't forget the older people, don't forget the younger people, don't forget it has to be inclusive. It cannot be exclusive.” (Jai)

Jai conceives of power as something that can be accessed by knowing the system and using a variety of creative tactics in order to achieve the desired results. Here there is an appreciation of the importance of understanding how power and decision-making operate. He considers the options and drives his point forward with determination, motivated by a belief in fairness and justice. This view appreciates historical power dynamics whilst employing alternative empowerment methods.

“Well I suppose, learning how the local authority works for starters. Or understanding, first of all, how they work and how you can not so much bypass the system, but finding a way through and getting a result really. It's not one way, its different ways of approaching.” (Jai)

Jai understands where power lies and challenges assumptions about its location. His focus is on unity based on a shared vision of improved living conditions and neighbourhood control. Reminding councillors who voted for them, demanding that agreements be honoured or drawing injustice to the attention of the media, Jai considers that he is able to shift the balance of power locally.

“It's a matter of knowing where the power-base is really. I mean politicians, the local authority, council members, tend to think they have the power. But in reality the power is actually with the people who put them in their place... So it's all down to democratic membership really. Which is one thing sometimes politicians, local authorities and officers tend to forget.” (Jai)

Jai has learnt from experience and developed an understanding about how to constructively initiate change. This perspective gels with Freire's (1970: p.58) analysis of social transformation through empowerment.

"I know it's a well-used business phrase 'knowledge is power.' I have the knowledge, or I have the experience and the knowledge now to handle the situation. And that helped me I suppose to build the power of A.V.T.R.A.. It's not about how many different people you approach; it's actually about how you approach each situation." (Jai)

Positive communication is recognised as an important step towards progressive action and community empowerment. Access to information is cited as impacting on participation, with particular reference to knowing one's rights and the need to make it easy for the public to get involved by making the pathways clear. This point is made by those at opposite ends of the power spectrum: Mathew from the Acton Gardening Association, a small voluntary group, and, Sam from Dominion Housing, a huge corporation. Mathew also sees knowledge as power then, viewing communication and access as central to empowerment.

"Well I could just speak from my own experience when I started the battle against the developers. I mean you just don't know the rules and you don't know anything. But I think that local councils should produce a booklet, telling you all sorts of rights and all sorts of rules, you know, things that you can do. You know I didn't know that I could go to the planning committee and speak for three minutes until somebody tipped me off. Well, that should all be in a booklet and it should be far more open. I mean I don't even know how to stand, to be put up for, locally. If I so wish. But all of us **should** know how it's done. I said this actually to some politicians: 'You're so secret, and you don't tell us anything, you don't communicate with us.' And I think there should be much more communication. Not only on the internet, not everybody has the internet. You know very few of our members have the internet, I think about five out of a hundred. I wish more did, but I think the internet's a wonderful thing, but still not everybody has it. So I think a booklet about all of the various things that can happen, should be done.

And it would be very interesting because for instance it's your right now under the Freedom of Information Act. Which of course local government hate. But they have to spell that out, and how you go about it because nobody knows, unless you ask. It's like parliament; unless you ask and frame the question properly you won't get the answer. You've got to know who to go to or how to ask the question. And in the Information Act, you've got to write to the right person. If you write to the wrong person they'll go 'Oh, it's not my business.' So that, I believe very strongly, could come about and should come about." (Mathew)

Mathew feels that we should all have access to power rather than it being controlled by political parties and financial institutions. He is a firm believer in direct action as a tool to raise awareness and initiate change. Mathew has a 'small is beautiful' approach to politics, the environment and society: valuing the input of local people in solving their own problems, and being empowered to do so. Communication and knowledge are key tools for Mathew, who sees the potential of community empowerment in challenging outmoded, bureaucratic and alienating processes. The transformative politics of social movements, the assertion that action can result in empowerment and the view that self-government should be aspired to is relevant to Mathew's perspective. Understanding the wider forces beyond localised concerns is increasingly required for empowerment to be attained, and as a journalist, Mathew understands this clearly.

For Sinéad it is the shared experience of parenthood that unites families behind the Sure Start banner, with parent-led provision and parent involvement in the decision-making processes. Sinéad acknowledges that in the Acton case, engagement is by the most isolated and marginalised communities who depend upon the services and involvement as a lifeline and way to meet their families' needs<sup>44</sup>. Acton's longer established communities have their own support networks in place and are consequently less likely to engage with the Sure Start programme. Interestingly, this pattern is not universal, as the Northolt Sure Start is dominated

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<sup>44</sup> This being a real opening to communicate and engage with marginalised communities whilst meeting their needs.



by the white working-class established community, as opposed to the new arrivals in the Acton case. The effects of globalisation and changing population dynamics in the area present ever changing challenges for service providers as they attempt to target the most disempowered communities.

“I think we’ve got a very loyal band of followers. ... [*but*] think there are an awful lot of parents out there that know nothing about us still. I mean South Acton and Acton Vale as well, and these two towers<sup>45</sup> as I’m learning, do have a good support network in its own right. It’s not as isolated as some estates in the borough where I think maybe because they are more transitory or whatever, in their population. There are a lot of second, third generation families on the estate: they’ve got their grandmas and they’ve got their families. So we are definitely attracting the new arrivals or the new family to the area: whether to the country or new to South Acton. Those people we really, really assist. They really get the most out of us and feel, you know, they’re constantly saying they feel we are like family and we are there to turn to...and we introduce them to people.” (Sinéad)

Making an impact at a strategic level is cited as critical to empowerment and prompting a culture shift. Demonstrating professional competence and having clout strategically is important to Race Equality director Naomi, sitting on influential decision-making committees within the council where she can drive forward equalities issues that support a culture shift on behalf of the marginalised.

“I myself am on various strategic committees because although you’ve got the community development side of the organisation, you also have the strategic side of the organisations, so I’m on various committees like the Independent Advisory Group for the police, I’m on the Equalities and Community Cohesion Sub Committee of the Local Strategic Partnership for which I’m Chair, as I said I’m a member of the Ealing Community Network, I’m a member of the Gun Crime Steering Group in Acton.” (Naomi)

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<sup>45</sup> Rufford and Morton Tower’s are local authority high rise flats in Acton.

Outsider strategies that have been identified in West London range from nurturing self-belief and vision, to gaining understanding and knowledge, through to lobbying, communication and community activism. Evidence of these different strategies highlights the spectrum of empowerment approaches pursued by 'outsiders', and provides an indication of the actions and aspirations of activists. The significance of 'invited spaces' as well as 'taken spaces' is evident here, with power dynamics present in every aspect of engagement and action. We shall now turn to insider strategies in order to highlight the effects of positionality on empowerment.

## Insider reflections

Those operating from positions of influence within the statutory, service and business sectors approach empowerment from a different standpoint than those coming from a grassroots perspective. Although, as will be suggested subsequently, there are also relevant comparisons to be made, as well as these contrasts. Furthermore, there are additional layers of complexity for 'insiders' with connections to 'the outside' which will be explored later. In this section 'insiders' reflect on the new spaces and opportunities for empowerment. R.S.L. officer, Sam, for example, also speaks of the flaws in the democratic system and the problems of representation. He points out the desirability of accessible and empowering structures, however, he also knows that this ideal has not yet been reached. Sam emphasises the need to get the systems right if people are to benefit from empowering opportunities.

"In which case it's about open, accountable, transparent, informative, all those kind of things. It's about having a structure that everyone knows how to access it, everyone knows how to use it and everyone has the opportunity to sit within it and to use that moment. Unfortunately I don't think we have anything like that."(Sam)

Structurally, there needs to be opportunity for participation and empowerment. Housing officer, Donald, points out that openings are provided for involvement, but cautions that people have to **want** to participate. In his view it is important that those mechanisms are in place to support people's involvement at a level that suits them. This is expressed by the Ealing Homes officer as well as from another perspective, the Residents Association, whereby both recognise and agree that people want to get involved in ways that work for them. There are community structures supporting participation, as well as civic structures allowing for resident involvement. Donald describes the array of ways residents can get involved at different levels of responsibility.

"Many ways. There's traditional ways, like tenants associations, it's not always the most effective but there are...twenty-five tenants associations.

Community groups that we use specialised in ethnicity or common-interest groups. We also have from those groups and also from individuals, we have people on focus groups that we run, like the Continuous Improvement Group, which looks at service delivery and how we can improve it (as the name might suggest). Resident Inspectors...who get the service provided and report back to us on their experience of the service. We have Area Boards, a recognised group who come together and make some decisions on how to spend money. Things like that... Up to, you have the actual A.L.M.O. Board which has resident involvement on that. And we also have quite a lot of tenants training. We put tenants on to recognised Institute of Housing courses. We've done two or three in the last couple of years, which gets them an accredited qualification. Same with the Community Activists Project, which I think was ten or twelve who have seen it through, which was a ten/twelve-week course which is accredited. From that, hopefully that'll develop into quite a big programme. So there are many ways of doing it. I'm not saying we've cracked it yet. But I think, by and large, if people want to be involved, they can do it at a level that suits them." (Donald)

For the purposes of this chapter it is sufficient to note that from the statutory sector perspective, service providers increasingly have to prove that they effectively engage with the community as validation for their existence. Failure to do so results in consequences such as funding cuts or loss of contracts. This national policy shift specific to the New Labour period has impacted on officers' practice and has spurred new ways of working with the community. Donald illustrates the power of the Audit Commission in terms of the mechanisms employed to ensure effective engagement. Once again, these checks and balances form an incentive for service providers in terms of their ways of engaging with residents. Donald describes the changes in officers' working behaviour, and notes the increased awareness amongst citizens' of their rights.

"But if you look at what the Audit Commission's saying now: 'That's great. You did all that. Now where is the paper trail to tell me what they said was

ever discussed or implemented? Where did it affect anything? All that talking.’ Which I think is wonderful because there were lots of times that I felt that people were going through the motions and all that. So now it is very apparent that it’s serious. Don’t just talk to people. You don’t want to waste people’s time. It has to be shown that they are actually being empowered to do something.” (Donald)

Whilst there are community involvement mechanisms then, these have not completely solved the inherent problems. Growing political disengagement, entrenched inequalities and marginalisation have been met with government policy shifts towards tackling engagement with the public however. Taylor (2003: p.21) highlights the need to move towards an enabling role for government, and this can be seen in recent changes to policing described by Charlie, and demonstrated by the increasing opportunities for the public to set targets through Safer Neighbourhood Panels for instance. Government incentives and the policy context are influential factors in creating the environment within which empowerment can occur. Structural characteristics that support empowerment in this sphere include having appropriate participatory targets and being held to account. The way the police force increasingly has to operate with greater transparency and accountability impacts on policing approaches. International, national and local policing priorities affect the style and approach adopted by the police across the U.K., whilst in parallel there is increasing weight given to locally agreed priorities. These local drivers are, however, set by people willing to engage with the police, and they are not necessarily representative of society as a whole.

“There’s always going to be times when certain groups, certain people probably won’t support the police. But I think we are moving more towards having more accountability, more transparency in what we do. I think the more information that’s out there in the public about what we do and how we do it, I think it only adds to our approval ratings. Because often these things are borne out of myths, or misinformation, or just a misunderstanding of what [*the*] police role is within society and how we go about our job. So I welcome more transparency.” (Charlie)

Supportive structures and an enabling culture that translate policy into practice are cited as clearly related to empowerment and requiring a change in behaviour to be effective. There is a need for capacity building if these government policies are to be effective. Charlie highlights the ways members of the public can have influence locally through new forms of civil involvement in setting police targets, but stresses the institutional flaws that prevent people from engaging, referencing the failings that will need to be addressed if there is to be effective representation. The crucial point here is that the emerging priorities reflect the calibre and nature of those participating. A concern is that as a result of 'unrepresentative' public input, police officers are directed to tackle vehicle theft as a worry of the residents of the leafy streets, whilst murder on an estate is not prioritised. These findings point to the need to reach a wider cross section of the community in terms of priority settings, as well as the need for support and capacity building for people taking up opportunities for involvement. Having a voice and being heard is part of the story; an awareness of the issues and the need to make informed decisions is equally important in his view. It is apparent that a culture change among citizens participating in Citizen Focus is required, but also for police officers, if these new ways of working are to be effective and the identified challenges addressed.

"It is difficult and whenever there's a culture change in an organisation, there's always going to be some resistance to it. It's always going to take a bit of time. But having said that, as part of our Policing Plan, is an element we call Citizen Focus. And Citizen Focus is talking about how we engage, how we interact with members of the public, how we reassure communities, how we allow communities to shape our decision-making processes, reduce crime and so on. So it is a set-in-stone police priority right across London, probably right across the country. It's probably one of those Home Office ones by the sound of it. But that Citizen Focus will in time become Citizen shaped. So when people become involved in decision-making priorities, they are then shaping the way we police. Which will take a lot of time, because it's complicated for members of the public as well. Because they

have access and are able to hold police teams accountable in a way that they perhaps weren't able to in the past." (Charlie)

The capacity building required in order to make informed decisions is a significant component of enabling structures and empowering mechanisms for involvement at a neighbourhood level. Without this, individual and community input remain partial and limited.

"The theory is that Ward Focus Groups will set the priorities for that ward. Simple as that. So, if graffiti was a number one priority on a ward, even if there was a burglary problem, graffiti should be the number one priority. What happens is though, I've seen this many a time: you can't just pluck someone off the street and expect them to make informed decisions. You have to actually give people the information, skills, bit of experience, bit of insight into what they are actually deciding about. So there has to be a period of time where you're almost educating people as unbiasedly as you can, because people will want to know. And I think most people will say if they find out that their ward has a street crime problem on it, they will want the police to do something about it, because they don't want to be a victim of street crime as much as anyone else does. What happens sometimes is, if you get people coming along and they live on a particular street and that street has a particular problem, then that becomes the number one priority for that particular person, and maybe less willing to see the bigger picture. It's about education and experience and providing people with the information to help make informed decisions." (Charlie)

Anthony's involvement in education, the community and the corporate sector has given him an insight into the mechanisms that influence decision-making. He is aware of the limitations of community empowerment due to constraining bureaucratic forces revealed through his time on the Single Regeneration Budget Board. However, he continues to pursue empowerment through knowledge as a central focus of his work with Thames Valley University. Exposure to a broad range of sectors enables Anthony to maintain a clear perspective of their interplay

and the ways in which Government incentives impact locally. Understanding the bigger picture and the interrelationships of different forms of power is portrayed by Anthony, along with examples of partnership working that illustrate the ways power is being redefined and refocused.

Economic drivers impact on empowerment. The current relevance of commercial viability as an incentive is referred to as a spur for action and delivery within the business **and** community sectors. The way the private sector has learnt the language of the public sector in order to win contracts by addressing community concerns through design is interesting to Anthony. The enormous influence of economic considerations in contemporary planning and development decision-making cannot be underestimated in his view. The political incentives and national drivers for the construction of housing and regeneration in the South East are further influences on planning decisions. Anthony is impressed by the cutting and competitive edge brought by the commercial sector to design and living issues. He sees their approach as embracing the new urban challenges in a way that the potentially out of touch and bureaucratised local authority structures inhibit.

“So I deal with the likes of Churfields up at White City, and speak to them and am deeply impressed by what a grip they have on what metropolitan culture is like: what are the problems, what are the issues and a clear sense of things that could work and what couldn’t work. Some of which they can’t do anything about, but in terms of urban design or whatever; or what Section 106 could be used for; or in the role of getting the local economy right so there are jobs available; the way in which housing can be arranged in a way to assist urban living, rather than make it into hell. You know, I’m really impressed by the way they address the issues, because it’s commercially viable for them to do that. It’s the best way that they can get involved in accessing the public purse as it were. Also, because the ‘powers that be’ are developing more, developed on behalf of the public sector. I mean at one stage local authorities were the big developers, but that never happens now. I’m not mad keen on P.F.I.’s and things or



anything, but actually getting the people who are most proficient if you like, in development to do the development was a good step forward.” (Anthony)

Despite the policy shift towards valuing citizen input and devolving power to neighbourhood level, the institutionalised power-holder culture nonetheless needs to be confronted if meaningful empowerment is to be achieved. Those without power describe this need, but interestingly so do those with power. Across the spectrum the importance of tackling the power issues permeating decision-making processes is seen as crucial to a transparent, negotiated and accessible power. Unless this is achieved, even the most well meaning empowerment principles will have limited impact and lack the confidence of all. Enabling structures and empowering forums demonstrate problems and effectiveness. Without political will and commitment from **both** sides, community empowerment is hampered. The breakdown of entrenched theoretical and practical barriers is apparently taking place. Evidence of the blurred boundary between sectors is emerging, with recognition of the need for proactive and informed transformation of attitude and action.

Illustrating this point from the community perspective the Sure Start officer describes the difficulties encountered when politicians and council officers fail to embrace inclusive local governance approaches. Whilst council officers also describe the need for commitment to actively encourage community empowerment, with the planning officer relating the need for officers and the community to have their capacity built if genuine understanding and empowerment are to be achieved. The A.L.M.O. representative and environmental activist similarly both explain the need for a change in culture for officers and councillors. Participants from diverse positions both recognise the need for a culture shift and a change in mind-set across the board then if long lasting and meaningful transformation is going to take place.

Historical and economic structures frame current opportunities to influence, as does the identified need to tackle entrenched inequalities, address issues of

access, identify what supportive strategies are available and develop an enabling culture. A holistic approach is seen as important in maintaining an overview and understanding powerful socio-political forces. The impact of commercial interests and economics are highlighted as significantly affecting access to power, whilst the importance of the translating and empowering role of bridging people and organisations is stressed. There are notable insider / outsider approaches, but there are also cross-sectoral similarities relating to perception, experience and the sharing of power. Here, illustrations of views relating to the culture change needed to enable effective empowerment are examined.

The research evidence demonstrates how perceptions of empowerment are linked to the policy context and the associated structures of opportunity and accountability. The policy framework is identified by research participants both in terms of the new opportunities and the inherent challenges it throws up. Having an empowering policy in place, and people committed to disseminating and applying it in practice clearly affects the ability to engage and take forward ideas. The implications of current policy on empowerment will be explored more fully later (in chapter 13).

Acknowledging that the empowerment path is not linear, there is an appreciation that capacity building is required in order to take up and make the most of opportunities by both the statutory and community sectors. The subject of capacity is raised by many in relation to the ability to engage meaningfully, whether members of the public, community representatives or officers. Accessible structures for involvement and the ability to respond meaningfully to planning issues are described by Dillan.

“And in a sense my role is to try and get systems in place that will mean that when something urgent does crop up, that it can be dealt with. But to be involved in those processes is something that will never be a priority. And it’s quite a long process. I think we now know the sort of mechanisms we want to achieve, but then there’s the capacity for those mechanisms to be able to work. So it’s all very well saying: ‘Yes, we’d like the planners to

connect with elements of the community in a particular way.’ So to say that in principle, but it’s another thing to know that when that mechanism is triggered that there will be the capacity within the organisation, let alone within the community, to be able to respond meaningfully.” (Dillan)

New ways of thinking and working are a prerequisite for the culture change identified by participants. The awareness raising and capacity building needed to support this transition are described, with an emphasis on openness and the willingness to adapt.

Insider perspectives and approaches have been described by those working in the local authority and business sectors. Here, the approaches are influenced by economic drivers in the case of the private sector, or government directives in the case of the public sector. The impact of these drivers on officers’ attitudes and actions has been examined with the significance of culture and method highlighted. For these actors, locating current policy and practice within a wider context whilst at the same time working within apparent constraints is both a tension and a challenge. An appreciation of these restraints is a useful tool in identifying and managing empowerment opportunities, their limits and where creative partnerships or network approaches may be necessary. The next section looks at the key role of bridging individuals and organisations in traversing the restrictions experienced by those outside and those inside.

## **Bridging role**

The significant role of intermediary individuals has emerged strongly in this study, reflecting a change in the way power operates and the way that these agents function. The ability to link apparently disparate worlds is a strong position that holds the potential to identify and overcome prevalent obstacles to empowerment. The insights of those that have experienced and understood life for those without and those with power can generate an empathy that connects both worlds. This linking aspect is explored in more detail through the following illustrations.

Sean manages a local community forum that forms a bridge between the neighbourhood and statutory sectors. He sees the interplay of power relations in society, having a broad overview of historical and political dynamics and an awareness of the changing context affecting power. He is conscious of the structural relationships involved and how these can be accessed and exploited in order to shift the balance of power. The founding principles of Acton Community Forum have been translated into accessible and empowering approaches that are gaining increasing significance with neighbourhood devolution.

“It’s to do with relationships, trust and values, and you need the person on the other side to be acknowledging the validity of the community input and the need for it. With power the number of dynamics involved, as well as the people who are relating to each other and who they have to answer to, it’s a spider’s web of inter-relationships.” (Sean)

Sean feels you need to learn to ‘play the game’ and the organisation is increasingly recognised as useful because it can ‘play the game both ways’. He notes the importance of understanding the micro and macro levels in the work undertaken by the forum. The significance of the way the linking role is progressively more influential is highlighted.

“What power we have, and we haven’t mounted any major campaigns as such, but we’ve changed some individuals’ lives for the better through our work with them as individuals and through the organisations we’ve worked

with. Our main ethos: 'they won't talk to you, you won't talk to them'. We are rare in having a foot in both camps." (Sean)

Illustrating organisational bridging, Sean describes the benefits to all. Clearly the residents and community can access information, opportunity and empowerment, whilst the public sector can access the 'hard to reach'.

"The Community Forum is an important structure, being the bridge that we've said it is, and given that it can put on its strategic hat from time to time and that we have the trust both ways. We're an important structure that gives access to power. So we're providing a bridge between the people and the Local Authority or the Health Authority. We're providing a bridge and a flow of information because we're able to tell the council or Race Equality Council, anecdotal, real things that happen, tied in with the broad political vision of community development, and we're also able to feed info back to the community. The decision-makers or strategic people do see us as a way of accessing the masses as well, which we're doing up to a point, but it's difficult given the resources we have." (Sean)

The potential to exert power, transcend obstacles and exercise influence is described by Sean. His focus is on overcoming barriers so that power is accessible at a grassroots level. The changing framework of governance has enabled new ways of operating that are evident in the working environment of Acton Community Forum. This situation has generated positive empowerment opportunities for individuals and organisations that are able to adapt to this shifting context. Taylor's (2003: p.102) view of power as dynamic and providing opportunities for assertion and intervention reveals an analysis of power that is negotiated. Sean shares this perspective of power where involvement and collaboration have the potential to open up new political and civic space. The notion of negotiable power is central to Sean's approach to community empowerment that redefines and reorganises power dynamics.

Umbrella organisations embedded in the community and being subsequently trusted are identified as contributing to their empowering potential. These principles have led A.C.F. to develop community-owned initiatives for example. Being acknowledged by both the community **and** local authority, developing and implementing strategies and networks that facilitate opportunities for empowerment are seen as significant factors in the growing role for A.C.F. within the changing framework of local governance and devolution.

“So you’re a bridge and you do the ‘voice of the people’ act sometimes. As that’s evolved, we’ve recognised quite quickly, and been told as well, where the work needs to be done, and that’s predominantly bringing people together, to build their skills, build partnerships, to work together, to work cohesively, make better use of resources, become stronger, delivering what we say we’ll deliver.” (Sean)

Some of the pertinent features impacting on the likelihood of empowerment are linked to issues of responsibility and recognition. The fact that A.C.F. makes a positive impact and is supported by those inside and outside is cited by Sean as generating authority. Devolution of power to neighbourhoods has clear implications for networking organisations.

“The impact that we have in terms of tackling isolation, the partnership working, the celebrating, the capacity building, the having a good time, it makes a really big impact there. And on the other side of the coin because we are clearly making that impact within the local community and it is perceived that we have the trust of the local community, looking up as well, that enhances the impact that we can make there. We’re managing that role quite well, because we are trusted by the policy-makers and decision-makers and the people who are doing things strategically, **and** we are also trusted by the people at grassroots level as well. It’s vital, otherwise there’d be a lot more relationships like S.A.R.A.G. and the Housing Department where their opposition to each other on both sides is institutionalised, and because of history neither of them trust the other. Which goes back to one of the key words: trust.” (Sean)

A holistic perspective and the ability to understand the bigger picture are reflected in the interrelationships of the different forms of power and apparent amongst those forming a bridge. This is described by a number of those with the time and consciousness to reflect. Crucially, the need to balance and understand the wider forces at play beyond single issue and localised concerns is increasingly required. Identification of the devolution of power is evident and comes over strongly from actors motivated by different forces but nonetheless working towards this end from inside and outside, and utilising a range of strategies and tools. This appreciation of power as political, social, psychological and potentially shifting is a finding that has been exposed across the sectors.

Personally and professionally, Sally provides another illustration of performing a bridging role. Having experienced struggle herself she understands and empathises with alienated young people and families. Organisationally, she also has experience of both the voluntary and statutory sectors. In her work, at a senior management level with Youth and Connexions, she is the only one that keeps in touch with the youth and community in her view. She recognises that this puts her in a strong position, knowing that she has influence to shape the service. Sally's intimate knowledge of the community sits alongside her role within the local authority, providing her with insight that informs her life both outside and within the system. This is a strong position to be in and one that is emerging as having enormous potential within current policy priorities. Over time she has adapted the strategies she employs in an effort to work within the departments constraining forces, whilst addressing the issues she is exposed to through her communication with young people. At times frustrating, with funding restrictions and rigid bureaucratic systems to contend with, Sally has learnt to balance the conflicting demands placed on her, trying to do everything within her power to support the empowerment of young people.

“So there is power and I do influence the way that we shape our service. I suppose power as a thing by itself is a bit meaningless for me really. I just think it's about what people do with it that's important. It's that same thing

about what I do with that power. The knowledge that I have it is an important step for me but actually what I do with it is much more important. If all I do with it is to enable the workers to collude with me against other people and we never move forward, then what rubbish is that? And if people in the local authority, government and things like that only use their power to only influence and shape things that they see as important in their areas and don't see things, then that's rubbish too. It's about what you do with it I think that is the important thing." (Sally).

Sally accepts that there are some things she can not have influence over, but is mindful of what it is she wants to create. She believes there needs to be a balanced approach and that treating people as equals has to be the starting point, and then it's simply a matter of getting on with it. This perspective guides her practice and is rooted in her personal experience of both spheres.

There is however, evidence of constraints inherent in the current context. For example Mahamad identifies tension between those with understanding and no power, **and**, those without understanding and power. Balancing these diverse tensions is something that Mahamad has learnt to do in order to address the inequalities experienced by the community he serves.

"It depends how we see power and how we translate. For example, my understanding of power is that it lies with society, with the community. But on the other hand, when it comes to what we are in [*the voluntary sector*] - power lies with others, which means the community are powerless in terms of them getting what they need because of how they are disadvantaged in terms of housing, immigration, education etc. And on the other hand - power lies with other people who've got a lack of understanding with who they are passing the power to and where the decisions are being made. There's a lack of touch with the real needs of the community - where people who have experienced homelessness and the persons making decisions about housing, there's a lack of touch between the full situation and how difficult it is..." (Mahamad)



Mahamad knows of the different actors, their roles and the forces at play in generating change. The inter-relationships within and between the different actors is also understood in line with the network society model. Mahamad is also aware of the difficulties experienced if shared understanding, common vision and equal partnerships are not negotiated.

“It comes from different angles. It comes from individual community activists; it comes from voluntary organisations; it comes from individuals who have got profile, like councillors, like M.P.’s; it comes from the community itself, those who understand about power. So although it comes about from different angles, unless we have a common shared working, then you never reach a common understanding of how decisions should be made within different areas where power lies.” (Mahamad)

As a refugee advice, youth and community professional Mahamad describes the role of the Tallo Information Centre in connecting services with the refugee communities.

“So the problem lies ... *[in the]* lack of understanding by the service providers or the stakeholders of the community needs **and** the communities understanding of what the mainstream services are. So the bridge is our organisation. So in that sense there’s a great interest by the stakeholders to get more clients, to pass these services to the wider community, to reach their targets.” (Mahamad)

Mahamad also points out the need for strategies that tackle education of the community as well as officers, if joint understanding is to be achieved.

“Accessing power is two-way. One is from the bottom having more of a relationship with the community that can build up their power and voice and all that; **and**, having connections with the top level. That itself can bridge the gap whenever empowerment is needed or participation. So there’s always a need for knowing at the bottom: the right language, the right culture, the right people and how to influence people; **and** on the other hand, understanding the right structure at the top, the right language itself and culture. Because decisions are made in two different ways. Now if that

is not possible, then accessibility won't be easy. Although the starting point would be at the bottom because that's where it's needed: empowerment. Although empowerment is needed on the top level too, when it comes to individuals understanding the bottom level. But the wider community, that's where it needs more understanding of what the issues are, where people need to be more educated." (Mahamad)

To understand and address empowerment there needs to be a recognition of diversity, inequality and tensions before effective alliances can be built. It is here that the important link provided by people and organisations that connect across difference is highlighted. Gilchrist (2004: p.36) points to the importance of doing just this, emphasising the building of informal links, networks and associations as a challenge to the formal structures of power. This position is evident in the philosophy and work practices of community workers and activists alike. The nature of the second tier organisations' work based on networks, empowerment and communication corroborate Gilchrist's analysis. Some of the community groups use networks to mount their campaigns, in particular those struggling for equal rights and justice around planning and development issues. The connections of community, solidarity and collective empowerment are perceived as the sources of strength and effective tools of change. The ability to shift power relationships is seen as possible from inside, as well as from outside the system, and through an array of different approaches. In parallel the nature and extent of empowerment opportunities described in this study fall beyond perceived expectations of 'them and us'. Instead revealing a more nuanced reality where officers and activists generate new ways of understanding and working toward empowerment. Reflexivity, the ability to explore new approaches and balancing power are important ways of tackling historically entrenched ways of seeing and operating. A finding of the research is that those professionals with direct personal and professional experience of urban diversity may be best placed to form a cross-sector bridge and better understand how to address community needs and empowerment.

The networking and brokering function of both people and organisations that are seen as playing an important enabling and mediating function has been identified. Bridging roles are highlighted in terms of their responsibility for negotiating, capacity building and providing support. The constraints experienced by outsiders and insiders can be overcome by those located 'between' and with an understanding of both worlds. A number of the people interviewed represent organisations that have this crucial role such as the Tallo Information Centre, Acton Community Forum, Ealing Race Equality Council and Ealing Community Voluntary Service. Each of these organisations works closely with the community and is able to represent the communities' views to service providers and decision-makers. The staff, organisational structure and approaches used are responsive to community voices, as well as to new forms of local governance. The bridging organisation can channel information and influence in both directions.

Individuals that do positively connect and match community needs with resources and service provision are sited where they can consciously raise the concerns of those without a voice. People who have experienced marginalisation themselves or have an intimate knowledge of struggle and have become empowered themselves can address the needs of those that are still disempowered. Illustrations of people who have transformed their lives whilst retaining empathy for others demonstrate how this can inform their practice and indeed provision. From the activists interviewed many share this characteristic. Ahmed, Sally, Sinéad, Bari, Jai, Khenan, Efia and Mahamad have all emerged from struggle and now support others that are still experiencing alienation and deprivation. Clearly there are those that gain power and never look back, but these activists do look back, extending a hand to others and working professionally to tackle the inequalities that permeate society. This connectivity links the powerful and powerless, both of which can benefit from this conduit, gaining greater understanding and potentially informing transformation.

However, it should be understood that bridging individuals and organisations are not always positive and can in fact act as gatekeepers, create blocks and speak for

people rather than enabling them to speak for themselves. Efi mentions the personal pressures of finding the right balance, and reflects on the dangers of oppressing others when people become empowered, or 'pull up the ladder behind them'. This is a real risk that has been highlighted.

"Again it's about wanting to give voice to something and somehow doing that without silencing others who obviously felt their voice was equally important. And how does your voice oppress or empower others, and working with that struggle. And so I'm still trying to find that balance. It's not easy. It's not easy at all." (Efi)

Bari raises the issues from an organisational perspective, demonstrating the tensions that challenge and can lead to loss of direction and momentum, seen in this illustration where actors' attitude impacts on dynamics.

"Everyone has their own agendas, everyone has their own personal history, everyone has their own buttons that are pressed easily for whatever reason... It's a miracle anything happens" (Bari)

Bridging organisations can succumb to these and other pressures. Losing touch with their personal and organisational vision as they come under increasing pressure to conform to the norms of others or deliver their targets. These pressures can become blocks if not carefully considered and managed.

In addition, the government may simply want a 'community representative' and are not concerned about the pressures that may be placed on an individual that feels obliged to confer with others first. This moral obligation is felt strongly by Ahmed when speaking on behalf of the Arab community for instance. Others, however, may be content to act as gate-keepers. Self-elected community champions allow personal gain to block community empowerment. The bridging role is fraught with dilemmas as the individual is pulled between both worlds and often needs to make compromises and face conflicting interests. Participants' have emphasised the constructive outcomes of their linking position, however the associated pressures cannot be underestimated and some do make reference to this pressure.

“There’s always conflict and tensions which needs more work and closer relationship to make policy makers understand the real terms and conditions about the community.” (Mahamad)

These and other tensions will be explored in more depth in chapter 10.

Returning to evidence of where these challenges are reaping positive results, in order to further illustrate the important linking function and establish key features, what follows are further examples of experiences and insights from those that personally or professionally bridge the gap. By reviewing these testimonies, their experiences help to build a picture of this challenging yet dynamic location. Earl advocates on behalf of South Acton residents, holding the local authority to account in terms of service delivery on the estate. He describes the constructive channelling characteristics of the organisation he works for.

“E.C.V.S. is in a very unique position because it is a buffer between the central body, local authority and grassroots organisations. So it is a pivot that is between, but can advocate on behalf of local people. I’m the buffer between the statutory organisations and the residents and groups...” (Earl)

A bridging position can also assist in establishing effective cross-sector partnerships. An illustration being where commercial viability for the statutory sector is demonstrated and a viable business case for the voluntary sector developed. Both impact on the probability of empowerment actually occurring. Partnerships that link the sectors are seen as a potentially positive strategy that helps people and organisations work better together in pursuit of common aims, provided that all parties enter into the partnership with equality and consciousness. As a professional, working in the education sector through the practice of the Pupil Parent Partnership, Bari points out the centrality of relationships in determining the success or failure of partnership work that bridges sectors. He also suggests a solution through self-awareness and reflexive practice which is clearly not always the case at all.

“Again, in terms of relationships, in terms of organising, whatever system you have its people that run it and you know if they don’t get on, you’ve got

a shit system whether it's the best designed in the world. It's how people operate it and collaborate in operating it that is going to determine its success. What I would hope is that we've got a great system and some absolutely key skills in terms of operating. ... So you take the same awareness, the same levels of skills into your partner relationship and you work out what's going on for you." (Bari)

Here Bari points out the difficulties of making partnerships work for those forming this important link and also identifying the necessary skills and benefits that can be achieved.

In an enabling role, Charlotte is able to support others to take the lead employing techniques such as encouragement, capacity and confidence building. Charlotte is self-aware about her own qualities and the linking role she plays in supporting others to grow and take on greater responsibility and power. This take on empowerment is based on Charlotte's conceptualisation of power as something that is shared and flows, as in Foucault's (1980) analysis, and is evident in her practice. Here, empowering others offers the potential of a cascading effect.

"...shared decision-making in my work with people who I build relationships with on individual projects, so I hope there is this delegated leadership with people taking on the confidence and willingness to lead and direct and share and be decision-makers in their own right." (Charlotte)

Race equality officer Naomi's perspective is one that takes a new look at voluntary organisations' dependence on grants, which can paradoxically cripple organisations, in her view. Instead, she recommends building their business case and having strategies in place that ensure sustainability, continuity and delivery by the community sector from a position of power. This approach turns relationships on their head, reorganises power dynamics and challenges preconceptions: a further illustration of the cross-fertilisation of ideas and approaches that transcend perceived boundaries. Naomi appreciates the changing policy context, the steer towards local governance, political priorities, economic drivers and the importance of the business case. In this way she demonstrates the way that those in a

bridging position can bring fresh perspectives to old problems by providing alternative options and thinking 'outside the box'.

This linking role can be referred back to Bourdieu's analysis of power and position, where he highlights the role of those situated 'between'.

"... those who occupy intermediate or middle positions ... owe a certain number of their most typical characteristics to the fact that they are situated *between* the two poles of the field, and in a *neutral* point of the space, and are balanced between the two extreme positions." (1998: p.231)

He goes on to highlight the potential of knowledge in understanding and transforming society. Significant here is the unification of the perceived and the real, together with the ability to analyse the production and reproduction of the symbolic mental and social structures.

"Knowledge of the social world, and more precisely, the categories which make it possible, are the stakes *par excellence* of the political struggle, a struggle which is inseparably theoretical and practical, over the power of preserving or transforming the social world, by preserving or transforming the categories of perception of that world." (1998: p.236)

Those located 'between' are physically and intellectually positioned with an overview that has the potential to make sense of and inform both worlds. It is here that this research demonstrates the opportunities for social transformation that this perspective affords.

A key feature that has transpired is that a broker between the local authority and the community is a pivotal role described by representatives from, and beneficiaries of, the second-tier infrastructure organisations in this study. This bridging position enables common ground to be sought, communication to be enabled, agreements to be brokered and compromises to be negotiated. These organisations are particularly well placed to understand the changing policy framework as well as to support the community to benefit from moves towards democratic devolution and neighbourhood control. Developing the skills to balance the different expectations and demands of the community and statutory sectors,

whilst retaining an insightful independence is identified as vital to the resolution of the serious issues emerging at this interface, and asserted by Cornwall and Gaventa.

“Increasingly, however, we are beginning to see the importance of working on *both* sides of the equation. As concerns about good governance and state responsiveness grow, questions about the capacity of citizens to engage and make demands on the state come to the fore.” (2001: p.32)

A recent paper<sup>46</sup> into the “experiences of people who have crossed over between the public sector and the ‘third sector’ during their careers” (David Lewis, 2008) highlights the individual and contextual significance of this occurrence. He suggests that this ‘cross over’ enhances knowledge between the sectors and has implications for policy – also a conclusion of my research.

Those conjoining the inside and outside have emerged as having the potential to be highly significant contributors to community empowerment. Whether individuals or organisations the translating role is strongly identified as supporting empowerment. The importance of the bridging function of organisations that straddle the private, public and voluntary sectors is evident. The role that frontline professionals play to ensure that community perspectives are acknowledged by commercial interests as well as the public sector is one that needs to be taken seriously. For those situated ‘within’ there is evidence of officers working to ensure that community perspectives are understood. This negotiating responsibility is one described by Sam from a social housing background, as well as by Dillan in planning and strategy: both trying to broker a compromised solution to satisfy private **and** public interests.

“I mean, we’re building a couple of schemes up here and I would advocate strongly for residents who are going to move in... Sometimes there are people that we can take on board and sometimes there are not. I mean I can argue from a community development perspective that a four bedroom flat on the eleventh floor of a tower block is probably not a good idea. But

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<sup>46</sup> Journal of Social Policy (2008), 37



actually it helps it stack up. There is always that tension within housing associations. Then in terms of me speaking to the local authority, then I suppose it would be inappropriate for me to suggest that's not a good thing. But then my concern is that they don't see that difficulty in the first place. But then again they have targets to fulfil in terms of they've got to build 5,000 new homes in the next ten years. So our role as an organisation means that we can help them. My role from that perspective is about trying to keep both sides informed, if there are sustainability issues and the community issues, as much as possible. Is that a conflict of interest? I think if the arguments on all sides are sufficiently robust and they believe in the arguments, then they should both feel comfortable having that conversation. And if I go into a meeting I never hide the fact that I'm working for Dominion, or what I do. So hopefully it's that they share a view the majority of the time... But obviously being responsible to the group in terms of community development, I think they're not aligned to what we should be doing in this department anyway." (Sam)

The case for community development having a role in supporting people to become empowered and active citizens is made by Taylor (2003: p.135) who sees its intermediary function as representing, supporting and negotiating the interests of the relatively powerless. Certainly those from community development organisations that specialise in translating between communities and service providers describe this purpose. This highlights the research findings concerning the potential empowering function of community development.

The tensions of this bridging role are great though. Retaining trust on all sides is an enormous challenge as those located in this position testify. The expectations and demands placed on bridging individuals and organisations are often in conflict, and the management of these tensions is paramount. Building and maintaining trust over time is difficult, particularly where there are opposing interests and has been raised by those involved in planning issues. These tensions cannot be underestimated and it should be noted that the strengths identified in the research

are not universal, as there is evidence that intermediaries may also use their central location detrimentally, blocking empowerment. Fundamental here is developing understanding of the bigger picture and nurturing visionary principles.

The pressure between community development mission to work toward greater equity on the one hand and the pressures from the state agendas for community work on the other, generates fragmented projects rather than informed action (Ledwith, 2005: p.2). Managing this pressure and maintaining the conviction to connect the personal and the political is a feature of many of the activists in this study.

“Government ... has implicitly recognised the lessons of the C.D.P.’s (Community Development Projects) in that it now provides an employment base which is fragmented, short-term and insecure. I think that practice is dominated by the policy and political context rather than creating it.” (Craig, 2004: p.42).

The unity of theory and action is something that is aspired to by individuals and organisations situated in a bridging position and practicing critical consciousness.

The research has revealed differences between insider and outsider approaches to empowerment, but it has also exposed cross-sectoral similarities relating to awareness, practice and power sharing. Experiencing empowerment directly or indirectly, as an enabler or beneficiary, the research respondents describe differences. There are those who argue that the best approach is to work from the inside (for example via the Labour Party); whilst others work from outside (as grassroots groups such as S.A.R.A.G.). Once again the relevance and usefulness of Gaventa and Cornwall (2001: p.32) working ‘both sides of the equation’ is apparent in the experiences depicted here.

The benefits of achieving influence and status is related as the definitive encounter with power by some. The most powerful arguments for this ‘insider position’ comes from Ahmed, who as a Labour politician considers that he has direct access to the Prime Minister and the Government, perhaps the clearest example of accessing

the decision-makers in the U.K.. By engaging fully with the political processes and effectively having a voice within the corridors of power in Parliament, Ahmed sees the benefits of this approach as affecting opinion and effecting change. Despite challenges to this conviction, particularly concerning the war on Iraq, his enduring commitment is toward direct engagement in party political processes. He also highlights the advantages of working inside the system, feeling in his experience that this provides greater influence than working from outside.

For those outside the system, some found the need for autonomy an important aspect of their experiences of engaging with power. Being able to function efficiently and unencumbered by bureaucratic constraints are referenced by those who work outside the mainstream. Here, independence and freedom provide the possibility to grow and develop with clarity of vision. The drawbacks of this location were identified as occurring when there is a need to work in partnership when there are difficulties of isolation; when the focus becomes inward looking and out of touch, or in times of crisis when the need to depend on others becomes necessary.

In contrast, a number of participants emphasise the importance of working inside/out **and** outside/in. Sally's conception of empowerment is also reminiscent of the model put forward by Gilchrist (2004: p.36) highlighting the informal links and associations that provide alternatives to the formal structures of power. Sally's work within the community shows a nuanced appreciation that helps address community empowerment, is a source of strength to her and an effective tool for change. Gilchrist's recognition of shifts in power relations is apparent in Sally's 'inside' work with the youth service, as well as from 'outside' with her community interests. The nature of empowerment opportunities beyond 'them and us' is seen in Sally's positioning and revealing a more subtle reality, with new ways of understanding empowerment. Interestingly, many interviewees share this position, with insights from informal grassroots experience influencing formal work practices. The utilisation of local knowledge in the resolution of local issues is important, and the key role of actors with experience and understanding of these issues has implications on the outcome of relevant and insightful solutions. A number of

participants have experience of working in different sectors, notably activists who have gone on to work in the public sector.

In summary, although there is evidence of tension and frustration in relation to the experiences of government policies for participation, in practice the routes to influence that have been identified in this research also illustrate optimism and determination in both recognising and accessing methods to influence the decision-making process. From different sectors, coming from different orientations, working from inside **and** from outside the system, participants reveal an array of potential ways to impact upon process and practice. The differences between the sectors do not necessarily dominate, as suggested in the literature which focuses upon where they conflict. This study asserts that there is also clear evidence of common ground traversing perceived barriers and it is here that there is the potential for effectively 'bridging the gap' and nurturing empowerment.

## **Chapter 9**

### **Possibilities**

**Building blocks**

**Commitment**

## **Building blocks**

In this chapter I look at the significance of capacity building to the process of empowerment and the evidence of long-term commitment toward this end. Having established the way that power is understood and the characteristics of given and taken spaces, this chapter is concerned with the mechanics of empowerment. All of those interviewed describe how, in one way or another, they or their organisation enables empowerment through personalised and institutional tactics and practices. These experiences demonstrate evidence of community empowerment strategies, proposing both that lessons can be applied and theory can be constructed on this evidence.

This first section examines the elements that are described as contributing to empowerment. The literature highlights and the research evidences people seeing themselves as becoming empowered; communities organising and building their capacity through acquiring knowledge, increasing confidence, sharing experiences and developing networks. What follows are accounts of these building blocks of empowerment.

The issues that affect the take-up of empowerment opportunities are identified in the research. Sean presents the ability to develop power at a neighbourhood level where it is seen as related to local resources, involvement and ownership.

“It’s a question of resourcing, about being able to reach people, enhance communication ... But that’s going to take time because it’s not just about the technology either, it’s all about the skills, competence and time. People come together about issues that affect them or to enjoy themselves.” (Sean)

Increasingly, community projects are developing strategies that involve networking and partnership approaches in order to be heard and achieve their goals. Adaptation to new ways of working, debating and compromising are being sought by activists who are finding that historical approaches are no longer appropriate or successful. Whether overcoming fears of engaging with mainstream politics

described by Ahmed, providing alternative workable options as in the case of the resident and community sectors, or adjusting to change are perceived as successful strategies, described by community worker Mahamad.

The analyses of cultural resistance and political action as routes to empowerment are described by grassroots activists. They highlight the generation of new vision, meaning and language, alongside new definitions of community, strategy and outcomes. Political engagement in the form of cultural resistance is identified as providing a significant step toward the development of creative campaigns. Culture is a place where solutions to problems can be devised and is a means of resistance for Efiya whose philosophy and life reflect Williams' (2002: p.35) view that "In order to strive for change, you have first to imagine it, and culture is the repository of imagination." The reflection that Efiya practices enables a measured consciousness that informs her involvement and approach.

The action of 'powerless social actors' impacting on the processes of social and political change (Tarrow, 1998: p.2) is also apparent in resident activists' articulation of the significance of public protest and social movements in developing neighbourhood control. The ability to harness collective power to transform the political arena and develop workable alternatives is something evident on both Acton Vale and South Acton estates where steps toward resource management are well underway.

It has been suggested that empathy and understanding may be developed when there is a connection between officers and communities, and where experiences of disempowerment are shared. Mahamad of the Tallo Centre describes how this foundation can build trust. When combined with education and professional experience this becomes a powerful tool in addressing fundamental inequalities. This underpinning knowledge evidently works as a way to identify with and appreciate community needs and takes these to service providers, matching them with resources.

“We are bilingual in a sense. We do know about the community issues. The individuals who work in the organisation themselves have experienced every difficulty the wider society is facing: if it’s immigration, if it’s to do with homelessness, if it’s to do with education. I myself have got practical experience of all of these issues and on the other hand, I’ve trained. I’ve been training myself to know the policies and practices in all these areas, and governance. It is a kind of lifeline in difficulties. ... And so it has a great impact because they can easily get a service which either can be passed on, or translated into Somali, or can represent their interests. ... Although we might not have the same feelings, but the same understanding is there which is why it has an impact. People have seen that this is a very good initiative and it is going to get better.” (Mahamad)

It is identified that recognition of the experience, dedication and connectivity of an organisation strengthens its influence. The knowledge-base and understanding of the issues affecting the Afghan people most reliably comes from Afghans and their organisation in their view. The fact that the media and government officials turn to their organisation for information and input is a significant indication of the credibility it has developed over time. The organisation plays an important role supporting new arrivals to the U.K., as well as established refugees and is intimately aware of their local needs within the national and international context.

“We help all of England because this is the Society of Afghan Residents in the United Kingdom. ... Those people you just saw came from Leeds for support from us. Yeah, this is nationwide. And also we will give somebody who is a refugee from all over the world help because we want to give advice for everybody...we will be of help to them.

The B.B.C. and the media come to discuss with us, because this is the only Centre that helps the Afghans. The media come, not just the B.B.C., but from the area...if they want information about Afghanistan they contact us. The government is also coming here.” (Saabir)



In parallel, resident association chair Jai emphasises the importance of shared experiences. He explains the way private and social housing residents associations unite over common ground in opposition with the public and business sector, with positive results. Building strong relationships with which to assert opinions and promote action breaks perceived mental and physical barriers. Being prepared to react creatively and proactively are significant features that enable opportunities to be identified and responded to.

“Going beyond the estate we had some influence on the local sports development. ... Our main concern was that we had lost a local, affordable sporting facility and we wanted to make sure whoever was taking over are giving something back to the local community. Not necessarily financial but some way of providing some sort of affordable access to the local community. And with the help of Bromyard Avenue Residents Association, which is a private residents association with 100% privately owned properties, we basically pushed both the council and the purchaser of that particular sports complex, Virgin Active, to accept a deal that benefited everybody locally. And it is not just for the Vale but also Bromyard Avenue and the surrounding area around there. So yeah we did make a bit of difference. And as a slight benefit to that we also had a bit of Section 106 money as well...what they call planning gain money for permission to build or to do something to a property, the council gets a little bit of money to share out to the local community. And we got some of that.” (Jai).

Having the tools to assert yourself and the knowledge to formulate a challenge are seen as necessary to achieve effective results. As a journalist, Mathew has the skills at his disposal and where he doesn't, knows how to access information and support, and thus has the confidence to take on the authorities. There is an important role for individuals and organisations with the passion and know-how to fight for justice. Mathew feels, however, that these rights should be embedded and built into the system, transparent and accessible for all.

“...one day the Goldsmiths sold a long lease to the Hogarth Club, they're a big private health club in Chiswick and they wanted to build a new health

club called the Park Club. And that would be on a lot of land used by allotments. And that's when the fight began. I really had to spend my whole life fighting, day-by-day. And that was three years. And we signed an agreement at the end which hopefully might come to an end in January 2006. That's three years after the decision. So I'd had three years fight, and three years waiting for the decision.

If you're fighting people, as I've explained to others who ring me and ask me how to make a fight, you must really concentrate all your mind on it, because you're fighting professionals. I was fortunate being a journalist. I could master things quickly and find ways to get information. People I'd interviewed in articles about allotments oddly enough, I then made use of them and they helped me. I learnt a lot from that fight, and I'm now able to pass it on to others. So I can shorthand other people's fights." (Mathew)

This position is reminiscent of the cascade-effect mentioned earlier, where the sharing and support offered to you is passed on to others.

The stages of empowerment that individuals need to pass through on their way to political empowerment from initial engagement, to support, peer reflection, participation, action and citizenship are identified by Warren (1997: p.115). This can be seen in the stories described as the contributors all relate the evolution of their beliefs, priorities and ways of working. People may not strictly define these building blocks. They do identify the development of their perceptions and practices over time however, which will be explored later. Developing a knowledge-base of empowering ways of thinking and working is evident, and the more connected with others working towards empowerment, the greater the possibility of sharing effective methods.

## **Commitment**

Longevity of dedication towards empowerment is a major feature that will be elaborated on. Having strategies in place to utilise in the pursuit of a cause are key to achieving empowering results. However, the dedication to pursue that cause over many years is also a common characteristic of many of the activists. All participants have been actively committed to making positive change in their sector / field / community / area of concern for their entire adult life. It appears that their beliefs have become integral to their life choices too, and that this has translated into extensive involvement in community empowerment, developing mechanisms towards this end over time. The remainder of this chapter illustrates the reasons behind this enduring dedication in an effort to identify key qualities.

Sally's lifetime commitment to the welfare of children and young people, and her long-term support for making a difference within her community is evident in her life choices. The recognition of the achievements of Acton Vale community activists demonstrates consistency in the pursuit of the common good. Consideration of context, appropriate strategy and effective action with a long-term perspective are characteristic features here.

"I think it was about power, and actually it was about staying power. And that sort of tactical thing where I didn't just bulldozer in and go 'No that's rubbish! You can't do that!' But just chipped away at it and in the end it ended up being a community facility. It happened because of the people that stayed with it. And other people for whatever reason, moved on to other things that were going on in their professional lives or whatever, so didn't turn up to meetings, didn't keep going at things and you know, in the end their stuff wasn't there. And actually we have what I think to a greater or lesser degree, greater I think, something that the community wanted. I think that's quite a powerful thing. To prove that the community stuck together and without being dogmatic about it, not 'No, no, no.', but 'How would it be if this was like that?' ...

I think we need to be, as a community, mindful of what it is we want to create. What is it that we're trying to do? What's the facility going to be for? What is our ethos? How are we going to run this building?" (Sally)

Sally imparts the need for consciousness and to design with community interests in mind. This is reminiscent of Mayoux's (2003: p.16) "power with" agency approach. It may be more challenging and require investment of time and energy from all of those involved, but the results can work for all parties.

People's sustained commitment is seen as an important indicator of validation and dedication. Sally sees the significance of young people who have benefited from neighbourhood projects giving back to the community by sharing those skills with the next generation. Here power and empowerment are described as a cycle where continuity is demonstrated over generations. This is evidenced on a number of occasions when local young people maintain a loyalty to the neighbourhood in which they have grown up, and demonstrated positive relationships with their community. Sally uses the examples of three young people from Acton Vale estate, each of whom took an interest in the children in their area: coaching them and taking them to tournaments when they were as young as fourteen themselves. Now in their late twenties, each has gone on to work with young people professionally, and are continuing to build on these early foundations.

"They were really young when they started. Alex started doing play-work at the play centre at 16, as soon as he could, and then moved on and started to do coaching and stuff in the playground with Laura at about 17. ... You see Natty out there now, he plays with them but you can see him doing bits of coaching with the younger ones, because he's at college or university doing that football sports thing. You see him out there doing some of that stuff, and I think it does create a culture in communities if you see people doing it and especially if those people remain around a bit as well. It keeps it alive." (Sally)

Similarly, in South Acton where Karina gives young people the opportunity and support to express and pursue their ideas. She sees this as the only way to

empower young people to gain self-belief and play a positive role within their community for the longer term. For Karina, valuing the young is an important way of helping them feel appreciated, gain confidence and contribute something to their community, in a cycle of reflection and action. This form of reciprocity amongst alienated young people counters popular opinion about the estate and indeed young people.

“The teenagers on the estate, they also come in as volunteers doing different activities with the kids: sports or swimming when we’re running the project. And the young people themselves; they state what they would like from us. What they would like to do. Then we say: ‘Well how would you go about doing this? And what would you in turn give back?’ A lot of the times people see it as a big issue but I think that if you have that, it’s going to work. If you don’t then it won’t. Some people don’t give kids a say, and don’t give them that much responsibility. Once they know they have a role it really makes a big difference. And in turn everyone is involved.” (Karina).

Empowerment is something to be grasped for Karina. She sees the potential in taking responsibility, embracing opportunity and gaining influence. Karina relates her view of empowerment to addressing local problems and stresses the importance of ownership.

“We are responsible for our own actions and taking control of things that’s around. As I say, run things in a way that is appropriate.” (Karina)

She sees the personal and political nature of power, whilst having the vision and tenacity to overcome experiences of disenfranchisement. This fits with Healey’s (1997: p.49) view that the disempowered can influence change despite power and policy constraints. This power is accessible and equips people with the potential to utilise opportunities for empowerment.

“There are different stages of power. You can use the personal and the structural power. You can use them both. It depends on how you see it and how you use it.” (Karina)

Karina also appreciates the significance of personal empowerment in tackling the acknowledgment structural inequality. The need for a flexible approach to power is

highlighted, alongside a long term perspective. Karina refers to determination as a key route to empowerment and that is reminiscent of Taylor's (2003) take on power.

"It is a struggle but you have to be determined. It's determination that makes it what it is. If you're not determined then you just give up. And it's what you know and the networking. If you don't know, then it becomes a struggle. With the centre there, it's who you know. It's as much about being a part of what's going to happen and how it's going to be run. You have to have a lot more people backing you. If you go in and there is just one voice...two voices will make people listen." (Karina)

Here commitment is highlighted, together with other characteristics such as awareness, involvement, unity and making use of networks.

Mayoux's (2003: p.16) comparison of empowerment objectives from agency and structural perspectives is a useful frame of reference. Actors identify 'power from within' emerging from consciousness and the aspiration / action needed to drive transformation. The commitment to bring about change is a strong undercurrent motivating action and influencing outcome.

Empowerment is perceived as being achieved across the sectors, but the greatest sense of accomplishment this generates is noted by community activists. The fact that the young people passing through Pupil Parent Partnership emerge with greater appreciation than previously and are in a better position to take an active role in society, demonstrates tangible success and the importance of continuity. Personal and professional commitment that translates into empowering future generations is evident in Bari's life and work.

"I think we have a significant impact with our clients, without a doubt. I mean 80% of them will have a measurable, discernable impact, before and after in terms of emotional literacy, in terms of attainment, accreditation, in terms of inter-personal, intra-personal skills. They are different people. I'm very happy with that." (Bari)

Other experiences of empowerment are linked to resources and transformation. Being a part of a movement for change and achieving practical results are clear indicators of empowerment for the research sample. This is also related to building confidence over the long-term, and a sense that change is possible - achieved through commitment. Earl uses the example of residents actually witnessing positive transformation in their neighbourhood as an incentive to further involvement and a way to overcome cynicism or at least to begin to build trust.

“Now I can see people start to see and feel the presence of N.I.F.<sup>47</sup>, with that involvement, people start to come forward. ... they can see things being done rather than talked about year in year out.” (Earl)

Secure funding is a clear indication of stability and continuity, enabling the community sector to focus on the work in hand. Having political and financial backing, Sure Start has been in a strong position to make an impact locally. Despite the difficulties of not always being taken seriously and introducing new ways of working that met with resistance, participants reflect that Sure Start is making a difference to families locally. It also provides a spring board for parents to greater involvement in decisions affecting their life. This evidences how government commitment translates into changes at the grassroots as in the Sure Start case, allocated funding creates security and a basis from which to negotiate, develop and deliver.

“I mean we were very fortunate in that we hadn’t got to scramble to fundraise. ... We were very comfortable and cushioned in that we had a guaranteed grant that we had to basically get spent. A huge privilege. I’ve never been in such a cushioned position. ... So our stakeholders were much more about making things happen to the best advantage to families. Which is a privileged position to be in. And how to make the most creative solution and not having to think about how can we afford this. It’s a blessing to be in that position.” (Sinéad)

Despite other limitations, stability over a relatively long period of time is identified as supporting the realisation of empowerment for disadvantaged families locally.

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<sup>47</sup> The Neighbourhood Improvement Fund allocated by a Residents’ Panel that has been used to make improvements on South Acton estate.

Significantly, Sinéad's transition from parent to worker with Sure Start has allowed unique insight into community needs, which has enabled her to provide targeted and relevant support to local families. Her story reflects the way personal dedication translates into the public realm, highlighting the significance of perseverance to empowerment. This illustration demonstrates the way that national and local commitment can combine effectively with the potential of creating a win-win result. However, this outcome is dependent upon continued support, which again highlights the fragility of sustainability. Some of the more negative aspects of Sure Start's changed structural position are explored elsewhere in other chapters. Across the sectors however, commitment is clearly evident in terms of the longevity of involvement in these illustrations of community empowerment.

Evidence explored in this chapter provides an insight into the qualities and characteristics that contribute to community empowerment. Those features that lend themselves to tackling alienation and marginalisation are apparent, and if carefully balanced **can** be harnessed to meet the needs of communities **and** institutions. There are challenges to be addressed however, and these will be examined in the next chapter.



## **Chapter 10**

### **Problems**

### **Challenges**

- Personal barriers

- Structural barriers

- Inequality and difference

- Short-term perspective

## **Challenges**

Despite the new opportunities for empowerment, barriers and tensions remain. Through an examination of these restricting factors, an awareness of what constrains empowerment and an appreciation of the impact of these limitations may create greater clarity regarding approaches to address them. Whilst new opportunities arise, new challenges follow suit. Tackling and balancing these tensions is clearly relevant to transformation. The obstacles to community empowerment are great, historically and currently, and whilst my research sample could be seen as unrepresentative in their determination to overcome these barriers, obstacles can and do prevent many from persisting in their endeavours. Indeed, obstacles to community empowerment compound the experiences of poverty, social exclusion and inequality experienced by the disempowered. This fatalistic acceptance of exclusion feeds into the negative cycle of alienation for many. I am aware that my research sample is not representative of this latter perspective in that instead, the research participants have attempted to break this cycle. Whilst the sample demonstrates determination to overcome barriers, they are nonetheless conscious of them. This research is looking for similarities and differences in obstructions across the sectors. Obstacles are grouped below into responses that relate to personal issues, structural barriers and disempowering bureaucratic structures, inequality and difference, and the problem of short term initiatives.

### **Personal barriers**

Personal issues that limit empowerment in the participants experience are described here – although these may be entwined with wider structural issues. From the personal to the organisational, from the cultural to the regional and indeed the global, past experiences powerfully impact on people's desire and ability to engage. For example, Ahmed speaks of the Arab people being politically **disempowered**, having witnessed the dangerous repercussions of political activity

in Arab countries; and subsequently transplanting that into the British experience by avoiding political engagement. The above reference to the global highlights the relevance of international experiences within the local context, and the effects on the willingness of the people to become actively involved in political affairs.

“The Arab community [*in West London*] is not an old community. It is only 20-30 years old. We are still first generation, and the second generation is just coming up now. Most of us came from brutal dictator regimes. We are afraid of politics, afraid of joining the political establishment because that was something forbidden from the Arab people. When we were involved in politics we ended up in prison. That’s why everybody believes that politics: leave it to the politicians, and its nothing to do with us.” (Ahmed)

Negative past encounters clearly affect ones readiness to engage and receiving poor cooperation further discourages involvement. Charlotte highlights the way inequalities prevents progress and effectively ensures the maintenance of existing unequal power structures. She speaks of the characteristics that can derail positive associations. Human nature and perceptions of hierarchy are seen as factors impacting on the enactment of power.

“I might approach a particular person, but they don’t have the same amount of autonomy that I do ... because sometimes just by seniority I feel I can give them that power to make a decision. But sometimes they are caught up in their own hierarchical structures. Sometimes it slows things down, sometimes it makes things grind to a complete stop and nothing happens, or sometimes it gets mixed up with other agendas.” (Charlotte)

Disempowerment can act as powerful disincentives to further engagement. Frustration is expressed by Karina who feels a sense of futility within the community. This structural inequality effectively disempowers people in a personal way. Having seen the positive results of constructive intercultural community life, she also sees the divisive effects of the feelings of having no voice, no provision and no morale.

“This is our struggle. Having no voice whatsoever. Our morale is broken because you work so hard and it’s been so beneficial and positive. ... Having built up this network and then having the rug pulled from underneath you. It’s as if you have no say and all your efforts coming to nothing.”  
(Karina)

There is a weariness affecting people’s spirits in relation to enduring problems that never appear to get resolved or improve. Within a changing policy and programme context, persistent problems continue. It is also noted that people living in the most deprived circumstances experience the schizophrenic reality of either being unheard and ignored, or over-consulted and the recipients of top-down new initiatives. Neighbourhood Renewal officer Earl describes the effect of this on local residents.

“People get suspicious of new programmes and there’s been a lot of disappointment over the years where some very good ideas have come from the table and gone straight to the filing cabinet and never seen the light of day. And it’s from this cynical point of view that it’s difficult to draw people out. But when they start to see action ... In South Acton, they’ve been consulted out of their box. Now they feel: ‘I’ll believe it when I see it’.” (Earl)

These experiences are felt personally by alienated individuals and members of marginalised communities. Social norms and cultural barriers affect their ability to overcome these embedded divisions reminiscent of Gramsci’s cultural hegemony and Bourdieu’s habitus, impacting on people’s perceptions, aspirations and mobility.

## Structural barriers

Structural barriers are identified as limiting individual accomplishment and impeding community empowerment where entrenched divisions exist. There is a mismatch of understanding and action of different actors and sectors. The interconnections between personal and institutional barriers emerge. Within the police force there is recognition of institutional failings as noted by Charlie for example. But he also points out the fact that some individuals and communities are either unwilling or unable to voice their concerns with the police. The reasons for this are many: for some having no trust, bad past experiences or not understanding how to engage. Bureaucracy and structural factors can also hamper empowerment however.

“There are movers and shakers and opinion formers in every borough, and those people are involved. The ‘usual suspects’. And yeah, sometimes, because of the long-standing associations, some have more impact than others because they know the system better. So it’s not to say that a Somali kid who plays for a Somali football team on Havelock Estate wouldn’t have similar opinions or better opinions or more intelligence. It’s just that they’re not able to access, or may not even know about these things that affect their lives. It’s not that hard to reach communities, it’s hard to reach services. And if people don’t know what’s going on, they haven’t got an ability to inform. So, I think there are all sorts of institutional flaws that affect people’s ability to get involved.” (Charlie)

Impatience with alienating decision-making systems is also expressed. Here, the characteristics of different institutions are reminiscent of Bourdieu’s hierarchical fields of influence. Mathew speaks of his frustration with the focus on talking as opposed to doing and the length of time it takes for things to happen. He manoeuvres in order to traverse the historical social divisions.

“Well I suppose it is because without power you can’t implement decisions. And that’s what I find very difficult with politicians and the meetings I go to. You feel you talk a lot. All these meetings are held by politicians or highly

paid people. All this very marvellous talk goes on, and then you think 'Well what's happened at the end of the day?' Well nothing! And I don't know why. But there needs to be more direct action I think ... because at the moment you have to go through so many people..." (Mathew)

Other issues limiting engagement and empowerment are isolation and negative labelling as well as mismatching of understanding. These structural barriers can affect opportunity and outcome. Differing perceptions and preconceptions affect the capacity to engage. For example, the life experiences of the Somali community from civil war and becoming a refugee to 'alien' status and marginalisation, the organisational instability and financial insecurity all generate barriers to development either as individuals, organisations or a nation as a whole. Speaking from the refugee perspective, Mahamad states that many problems arise from poor communication and understanding between the service providers and the community, leading to serious socio-economic issues for those whose basic needs are not being met.

"I mean the mainstream provisions ... they do see the community as 'hard to reach communities'. ... So the problem lies... There is lack of understanding by the service providers or the stakeholders about the community needs. And the communities' understanding of what the mainstream services are." (Mahamad)

From another perspective, but also relating to miscommunication, Bari talks about different work ethics and personal approaches that affect relationships negatively. The dissimilar value systems within and between organisations are identified as affecting communication and partnership work.

"Partnership has always been hard. It's always been **the** most difficult thing. ... So, I'm a passionate believer in partnership work, always have been. It's finding a way to do it successfully without complicating life immeasurably. The problem is one of the ways of dealing with partnership working effectively I think, is working reflexively, using self-awareness to drive professional practice. The trouble is, we do it, but no other bastard does.

So it's difficult enough to do it internally but it's a near impossibility to do it out, unless you've got really trusting relationships with people. Which I have and we have, but they tend to be with individuals rather than organisations, and that is a big, big difference. I can have a relationship with you and it's lovely, but if your funders are putting pressure on you to do something that doesn't quite sit with what I'm trying to do... Those sort of things affect how we think and behave, without it really emerging sometimes, without us really articulating it and it becomes complicated, it becomes personal ... So, that's one of the big problems I think." (Bari)

Conflicts of interest and different priorities are raised as restricting access to power. Personal agendas and the desire to control are also cited as impediments to progressive involvement and empowerment. Having felt blocked by systemic controlling forces, Efia feels there are barriers to new ways of thinking and behaving, and has met with resistance when challenging existing approaches.

"I didn't like the regime of the school at the time. ... Things are changing now, but again in those days it seemed like it was very different and the kids weren't really being inspired to learn. ... When you come with new ideas, you have to deal with the system. The children are the least of your worries. It's the teachers who are part of the old school who don't want to embrace new ways of learning." (Efia)

The openness to questioning and learning is characteristic of Freirian thought and is a feature of Efia's approach that also highlights the barriers to progressive thinking and the structural barriers that obstruct empowerment.

"Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world." (Freire, 1970: p.34)

Khenan illustrates the blocks experienced when opportunities to really share power are sought. He recognises opposition at resident level through to local and national government level, feeling that it is an enormous challenge to turn this acculturation around. Khenan acknowledges the difficulties in changing ways of understanding and operating for council officers as well as for residents, appreciating the way that power functions in society and people's resistance to change.

“As we said in the S.A.R.A.G. Times<sup>48</sup>, the idea of power sharing is a very difficult one, because it's not just the powerful. The powerful will make nice noises about community involvement, community engagement. Nowadays it's not 'participation' any more, it's 'involvement'. So therefore they can decide how much involvement you may have, you know what I mean? But when you really try to make the thing real, the resistance starts. And it is not because ... there are some saints in the community and some very devilish people at the town hall or wherever it might be, but the whole thing is cultural. People expect things to be done from the top, in fairness to them. ... It has to be that the council make a move - then you respond. It's mostly like that. And when you try to turn that around, it is difficult. It is a hard task. Because it is not only that the powerful are paying lip-service to change and to the distribution of power. Because if you read the statements that Tony Blair made from the moment he came to power, you would think that this country could be transformed. But it hasn't happened. It simply hasn't happened because culturally power comes down, power is not actually something that moves upwards and power is not to be shared. Quite frankly, historically, people have acculturated to the way in which we are buffered, to the way in which we live our life and so forth. When you say 'Well look here, we want to change that', they don't even take you seriously. That's the beginning. They do not believe that you mean it.” (Khenan)

Structural inequality and the division of power are highlighted as underpinning the barriers that encumber development. An awareness of the impact of this is clearly

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<sup>48</sup> S.A.R.A.G. Residents Newsletter.



significant, such as Khenan's identification of the local authority's top-down control and lack of an empowering culture.

"The structures within which you have to operate impact on the empowerment process, and it can be positive or negative. ... But the truth is that the framework that we have, because it is a framework more or less determined by the local authority, it's not conducive to empowerment in Ealing! ... because of the absence of a facilitating culture in Ealing."  
(Khenan)

The power differentials manifest in the social, material and political inequalities are also apparent in the ideological and cultural approaches of both the powerful and the powerless for Khenan.

Whilst recognising the slow and small steps that are being made toward improvements, Anthony (from T.V.U.) acknowledges that the work he is involved in makes very little difference in the grand scheme of things. The appreciation of the wider and more powerful forces in society keeps Anthony's sense of purpose in perspective.

"In the kind of work that I do, externally as such, you've got to be very careful not to pretend that you are making that much difference to anything. The Partnership<sup>49</sup> had come around to enable the government to have some kind of credentials about giving a little bit of money away. You know it's not really about giving me, as a stakeholder, power to change things as such. And if it was, we wouldn't be given it in the first place. So that sounds unduly cynical but I think you have to be realistic and have a sense of the way in which the world works." (Anthony)

The impact of constricting and controlling systems is recognised by Anthony, who has experienced the reduction of ambitious, innovative plans into uninspiring and unimaginative realities. Government initiatives that appear to be inclusive and all-embracing turn out to be exclusive and piece-meal, as in the case of the S.R.B.

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<sup>49</sup> Anthony sat on the Single Regeneration Budget Board.

programme described below, where overly bureaucratic systems of accountability limit creativity and inclusion.

“I mean the classic was S.R.B., Single Regeneration Budget. I remember sitting down in Ealing Studios with some people from the London Borough of Ealing and we really kidded ourselves that we could make a real difference in Acton. And we were going to have this money and we could spend it on innovative projects and make a real difference. But of course it wasn't like that at all because you had to fill in the form, it had to be approved, you had to be processed which by definition rules out voluntary groups or whatever. And you are back to the big boys getting the bucks and doing something that's rather routine and uninteresting, usually because the funding for that piece of work that they used to do has been taken away anyway. So you are recycling money to fill gaps because other money has been taken away.” (Anthony)

The maintenance of established power dynamics is evident with networks of influence and institutionalised mechanisms that ensure social reproduction (Bourdieu's cultural reproduction), that block innovation and subsequently transformation.

Practices that inhibit empowerment are identified. Frustration is expressed in relation to dealing with incompetence and resistance, including descriptions of officers' ineptitude, focusing on 'ticking boxes' rather than genuine engagement. Officers themselves reveal practices that avoid genuine engagement. Donald mentions the effects of accountability systems and the changing policy context affecting practice.

“It's not just about what it was traditionally. There's no denying, it's no secret, you would get a group of tenants, tell them something, go away and say that you'd consulted. Still goes on in other organisations I'm sure.” (Donald)

This illustration highlights institutional culture where bureaucrats are resistant to change and impede progress. For others there is a disparity between inclusive,

empowering approaches and their experience in practice. Sam describes systems that exist within the national, local and community arenas that replicate an arrangement that is flawed and unequal.

“...it’s about open, accountable, transparent, informative, all those kind of things. It’s about having a structure that everyone knows how to access, everyone knows how to use and everyone has the opportunity to sit within it and to use that moment. Unfortunately I don’t think we have anything like that.

In terms of a community perspective I suppose you’ve got the structures that we put in place. Again... All this makes me laugh. As soon as you get in to voluntary, or any kind of structure or any kind of movement that then wants to influence local authorities, it doesn’t matter how much they hate the local authorities they instantly replicate the structure. They instantly have a cabinet, or a committee, or a sub-committee, or whatever it is and then they immediately elect a Chair. And then they have a Secretary and a Treasurer. ... Why? Why don’t you have something completely different?” (Sam)

Bureaucracy is described as creating additional hoops through which to leap in order to advance, whilst official procedures and red-tape frequently block the progress of all but the most determined. The structures established for government accountability may indeed begin to block civil involvement and empowerment if this is not addressed. Mathew identifies laborious institutional structures, unknown and inaccessible routes to the decision-makers, and the fact that this is sited too far away (in all senses of the word) from local people and local issues.

“So yes you need power to do things, but at the moment you have to find where the power is, whereas it should be locally.” (Mathew)

Not being listened to is a major problem for the disempowered, where the articulation of opposition and dissatisfaction is ignored by those with the power to implement change. Local, national and global issues are all identified, with reference to the voicing of concerns about the mismatch of democratic principles

and practices. A number of those interviewed highlight the example of popular opposition to the War on Iraq which became a key symbol of disempowerment. Effectively, trust in the Labour Administration, its decision-making processes and methods of accountability to the electorate were shaken as a result. Questions concerning what influences the outcome of parliamentary decisions were raised, democratic structures probed, as well as global economic and political considerations queried.

“And on the War in Iraq for example: a subject which many ministers resigned over. Because people should have been allowed to look at all aspects in a free way and speak according to their conscience. Even when two million people were on the street, the government should have taken this into account. They could have waited a week, then the United Nations team would have come with their results. We would have seen that there were no weapons of mass destruction. Actually the Americans, they knew there were no weapons of mass destruction and they pushed for the war.

They wanted a war. An abuse of power!” (Ahmed)

Despite his belief in democratic principles, Ahmed identifies major flaws in the way that decisions are made in parliament that overrule the opinion of citizens.

The structural conflict approaches of Marx, Gramsci and Lukes are portrayed in the illustrations in this section. Bourdieu’s fields of power and symbolic capital are also evident, revealing the psychological and cultural barriers to empowerment. Theoretical models are useful in framing the issues, however they don’t fit neatly with the research sample. Instead, actors draw on a range of frameworks to make sense of their complex situation. Nonetheless, these barriers highlight the challenges to empowerment, whilst revealing the different ideological perspectives of participants and evolving frames of reference.

## **Inequality and difference**

In this section the impact of inequality on access to power will be considered. Experiencing differential treatment and unequal opportunities emerge as considerable barriers to empowerment. Naomi uses the negative experiences of black boys in the education system to illustrate the damaging effects of alienation. Her emphasis on equalities issues is central to her perspective, is evident in the experiences of those whose needs are not being met and whose reality impacts on their life chances. The debilitating impact of continuing inequality and discrimination is highlighted as central to the Race Equality Council's work priorities in addressing empowerment through equality of opportunity policies and practice.

“Education, employment, equality of opportunity from the beginning to the end. ... There's equality of opportunity around every service that we have. Because if we look at social policy, the most disadvantaged sections of the community, they are Pakistani boys, Bangladeshi boys and Caribbean boys. Not African boys. Caribbean boys. So it's got to be equality of opportunity. Also becoming part of those statistics are white working-class boys, who are now classed as 'white disaffected' because they mix with B.M.E. boys. So power's already taken away from those boys because there isn't equality of opportunity.” (Naomi)

Tackling historical inequality is a fundamental foundation for engagement Pahl (1974: p.86) describes polarisation and segregation in the post-modern city as the result of past and present conflict, together with inequality and difference between those with and those without power. Efi identifies the moment that A.C.E. was invited as equals to participate in discussions concerning the educational achievement of Black children. As a Black organisation, being historically marginalised simply perpetuated the difficulties, whereas the acknowledgement of their contributions felt like an important first step towards a more egalitarian relationship.

“Oh it’s very important in policy and political work. And it has to be born out of grassroots experience of ordinary people. ... So for example, only two weeks ago there was a meeting which was to do with an anti-bullying conference at Ealing Town Hall. This time they were inviting all the teachers, not just from Ealing, from all over London. There were police there from Haringey, there was another social worker there, teachers there, but you know what, A.C.E. was invited. But this time, we didn’t come in our parental hat. We came as pedagogic professionals, because some of us happen to be involved in education in one sense or another. So we could also talk. Because there’s no point having these discussions where you are talking about racism, but you’re not involving a Black group. That was a significant turning point.” (Efia)

Some people experience glass-ceilings and brick-walls as unspoken barriers to development. The powerful go through the motions of power sharing, whilst not actually letting go of control. This is identified by Sinéad who sees the tools employed to prevent inclusive practice and maintaining the existing power base. Resistance to change is described, as well as the attitudes, behaviour and systems that block progress.

“The kind of formalities that local government like to cloak a lot of their activities in: that is a huge barrier to having any influence to any power. Because the meetings are still very, very jargonistic, they are still very exclusive and they are still very unfriendly. So they make sure that the centre of power remains at the centre. And it is still very evident that most people have got very little influence over decision-making, and it’s just a talking shop and decisions are still made behind closed doors, and made very instantaneously and are reversed equally quickly. So lots and lots of the networks that have been set up for all sorts of reasons are sort of losing their ‘raison d’etre’ because they don’t believe they are having any influence over those decisions. Not because they haven’t got the will, and the means and the ability, but because the powerful are not taking on board proposals being put to them. It ultimately hits a barrier at a level ... I don’t know

whether blame is a useful thing anyway, and there's a lot of that that goes on in South Acton anyway. A lot of 'because of that...because of the council officers... because of the councillors.' Whatever... It's got to be breaking down all those communications ... There's still a huge negative vibe on the estate that progress will never be made, and power will never shift, whether it's residents, or tenants, or parents, that there will never be a chance to influence any decisions locally." (Sinéad)

Earl mentions the tension that is present in the unequal relationships that exist between those controlling and those in receipt of funding, where any discussion between the two is influenced, directly or indirectly, by this power dynamic. This context clearly impacts on individual perceptions and the enactment of power.

"Whether it's organisational or individuals, some people are very reluctant to voice their opinions, views or aspirations. There are two sides to that, sometimes it's intimidation by the purse-holders, at other times it's the community or residents' point of view. It can be lack of confidence, and the third aspect is really where you find a lot of the community groups sitting at big meetings where you have really senior people with the local authority where people are afraid to challenge them because they are receiving local authority funding. It's very difficult to be tough on the person that's feeding you because you may be cutting your own throat, and you could be making your own organisation vulnerable by making demands and challenges. People weigh up these things and sit meekly and calmly and say nothing. So it would give the impression that the purse-holders are running things and I suppose in truth they are, but they would never come out and say that because they have to be seen to be playing fair." (Earl)

The paralysing effect of poverty is depicted by Sam, where coping with the pressures of daily life effectively pre-empt engagement with anything outside the realm of basic subsistence. Involvement will be limited for the most disadvantaged residents whose personal circumstances prevent them participating meaningfully.

“...where local authorities stopped providing housing, and that’s where housing associations started to pick that up (*the homeless and vulnerable*) who, for the majority are fairly silent and are not really empowered and tend not to engage. I think it’s partly to do with that they don’t have a high expectation. ... they clearly have such a wide range of issues that their view of the association isn’t on the scale of important things, unless it’s about repairs. ... There are a few people who become engaged, but ... because they tend to have a wide variety of issues and tend to be extremely vulnerable. I mean our average resident who comes from that route will come from a Black and Ethnic Minority background, will have a number of children, will be young, a good chance they will have a disability, 60 or 70% of them will be on Income Support, Housing Benefit, will have serious problems with their lives and so will make it difficult for them to view us as anything else than another challenge and often because of their circumstances will not come together collectively to challenge us to do anything about it.” (Sam)

Similarly, Saabir comments on the enormous catalogue of difficulties facing refugee communities, compounding their experiences of marginalisation, disaffection and alienation. First and foremost, these problems need addressing if empowerment strategies are to be effective in the long run. Once again, the impact of London as a global city and influenced by international issues is raised. The challenges of changing demographics, immigration and asylum issues are all affecting experiences at the grassroots level and compounding problems of alienation.

“Family problems, housing problems, the health problems, drug problems.

We see, day by day, the problems in this country.” (Saabir)

Where the focus is on the daily struggle for survival amongst disadvantaged members of society there is little energy left for involvement under such psycho-sociological disempowerment.



Other challenges that raise questions concerning uneven arenas that impede empowerment are described. Bari conveys the poverty and passion in the community sector, and in contrast, juxtaposes this with the relative wealth and apathy in the statutory sector.

“That we are here and we’ve got all the mouth, all the passion. Wanting to do it but we’ve got fuck-all else. No resources to do this. And the people that sit on mega-budgets they really appreciate what we are doing and they are very interested in it, and they are...very supportive to us. But I want them to take risks. I want them to say: ‘I sit on a million pound budget (which easily will do), how am I going to not only manipulate that budget but think about the structures for the borough so that these sorts of things can happen?’ ... That’s what I’d be interested in.” (Bari)

From the policy perspective Naomi identifies a disparity between high level decision-making and grassroots experience. A lack of innovation in translating policy into meaningful practice is evident. She points to clear inconsistencies between lip-service to equalities issues and the unequal access to positions of power. Here, the gap between equal opportunity, representation, democratic principles, and, the entrenched inequalities within the system is highlighted.

“I think politicians are scared. They are scared to face the changes that have occurred over the years. We are not the same. We’ve all grown up. Everyone is growing up. And it’s also the attitudes of the politicians. You can’t have Members of Parliament, where you have to ‘spot the black and ethnic minority.’ Or the disabled. Or the women. You know, that’s not representative of your country.” (Naomi)

Sean points out the increasing separation of politicians from neighbourhood realities, whereby there is an inverse relationship between the concerns of the powerful and the powerless. Once again the influence of the global on the local is identified.

“Just as there are decisions that are out of Councillor Bishops’ league, and decisions out of Gordon Brown’s league, and Blair’s league, that are made

by the people that back Bush and Carey, so whatever happens they win. But that's on a very global level, but that impacts us locally because all of a sudden "everyone hates Muslims". I'm referring to what happened on Saturday<sup>50</sup>. I'm sure if there hadn't been all the anti-Moslem press and hysteria it wouldn't have been as bad. You hit a series of glass ceilings. Trying all these ways out of the maze, but you keep coming against glass ceilings and so it's limited. You won't get high up the political tree if you're responding to the needs of your constituents and dealing with the grassroots issues." (Sean)

Furthermore, he identifies the obstacles that limit access to power for many.

"Everybody has power to influence their own lives and therefore surroundings, but there are always all sorts of outside influences, or hurdles, or gates, or other obstacles or barriers, and there are all sorts of gatekeepers at the different levels." (Sean)

There is a sense that the focus and priorities of service providers is led by targets and objectives that often do not match those of the community sector, leading to non-delivery on matters identified as urgent by local people. Sally treads a path between the young people she serves, the youth workers she manages, the senior management team she informs and the government targets to which she has to respond. Having experience both within the community and within the local authority has given Sally valuable insights into effective strategies that create a dialogue between the young people and the service, within the confines of council priorities and funding allocations.

"It's about what you do with it I think that is the important thing. Without that base it's just a dictatorship and being told what to do, which would never work very well for me anyway. So I don't acknowledge it as a powerful thing. Although I'm sure that if someone made the decision that that was going to happen here, then you couldn't ignore that decision. You'd have very little choice in the end." (Sally)

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<sup>50</sup> An incident involving a Greek shop keeper attacking a Somali woman after she had accidentally reversed her car into his shop window, smashing it: an incident which escalated from a localised problem, to a race issue, generating anti-Muslim feeling and expression.

Sally identifies the problems that emerge from compartmentalising society, dividing it up in such a way that prevents treating society and its problems holistically. In particular she highlights the way children and young people can slip through the net of children's services and society at large. Young people experiencing serious problems often lack the support and skills to cope which repeatedly results in tragedy. Sally tells the story of 'black on black crime', and the ultimate experience of disempowerment with the taking of another's life in a desperate attempt to feel powerful with a knife on the street.

"I think there's something about starting younger. ... Try and do stuff early on to make a difference there. ... But it's like you got these two young people when they were fifteen and they came from the most opposite different life experiences. Both quite violent, both quite damaging and yet there wasn't a sharing of identity around that. There was just a divide because it was just such a different thing. A young man who'd come from Somalia during the war, and the other young man had come from Jamaica from a town where life was hard. The young man from Jamaica had twelve of his friends die before the age of something like thirteen. It was a shocking thing. And this other one had seen war and been living in a war. Yet they couldn't come together at all on that and also they couldn't hear each other. My colleague was just flattened by the fact that their relationship had gone so badly. But when you get them when they're fifteen, this is what they come with. And you've had them for less than a year... I think it's a tall order. And that kind of situation can explode at any time, over rubbish. Just because these two young people aren't going to be able to hear each other. That's quite an extreme example, but I think that goes on a lot when we get them at that age." (Sally)

This illustrates a different sort of power where young people are resorting to gang affiliation and violence to exert control. This trend is causing great concern to activists and officers working with alienated and marginalised young people, who are both the perpetrators and victims. The story also demonstrates the enormity of

the challenges of contemporary globalised London living and highlights the scale of the barriers that need to be addressed.

The catalogue of inequalities highlighted here from a range of actors signifies the scale of the challenges. They also resonate with Ledwith's (1997: p.1) emphasis on the political nature of inequality and the need to address it by understanding the nature of injustice and through a commitment to transformative action. These illustrations reflect the underlying issues of inequality that lie at the root of the problems faced by communities in West London. The focus on community empowerment sits within these broader considerations which impact on the problems, nature and practices of participants. The next section examines the impact of short-sighted and short-term approaches.

## Short-term perspectives

The debilitating effect of a short-sighted outlook is identified as a problem across the sectors. Piecemeal involvement, slow progress and having limited vision put off all but the most determined or experienced<sup>51</sup>. The importance of long term support is highlighted, rather than short term initiatives. Indeed, the constraints that are cited most frequently are time restrictions and financial limitations. The different experiences of activists and officers are evident as Donald explains how financial priorities within a large organisation like Ealing Homes affect what can be achieved for their tenants. For a community organisation like the Society for Afghan Residents in the UK, lack of funding has a crippling effect. With no resources to even cover the costs of a worker, the organisation is forced to rely on the efforts of volunteers. The difference in the effects of scale and impact is highlighted through these findings.

“Well ... a lot of things we might want to do, we can't within the budget that we are given. So obviously, finances have to be part of the decision, value for money and things like that.” (Donald)

“Because our budget is stopped, suspended, we do not have a special budget to give a worker. We are applying now. If we get a grant, a worker will be coming in. Now for the time being they are all volunteers.” (Saabir)

Ongoing commitment and support is needed if opportunities are to become, and continue to be, fruitful. Charlotte is concerned that the maintenance of good practice and good projects is something that usually happens by chance or by the determination of a few rather than by intention. Sustained support mechanisms need to be factored into the planning, implementation and continuity of empowering programmes it is suggested.

“...it's got to be maintained. I think that's sometimes the hardest because you know how things get peaks and troughs. I can think of several things that I've been involved in over my career. Starting off a cycle with nothing, building up and then getting this fantastic thing going, and it spins off and it

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<sup>51</sup> This links back to the significance of commitment discussed earlier.

goes... But then time happens, and there's decadence and it goes away ... Maintenance. Not maintaining it so that it's the same, but maintaining what is good that shouldn't be lost. And I think that only happens by accident, I don't know if it happens by design." (Charlotte)

Many of the community organisations feel their focus on survival detracts from the work-in-hand, particularly where securing funding and sustainability issues become a prime motivation at the expense of the organisation's *raison d'être*. The tension between ensuring organisational survival and maintaining the work priorities is identified. Government commitment to citizen involvement and the devolution of power are positive measures supporting empowerment, but also embody tensions that need to be addressed and that remain fragile in the light of shifting political agendas.

Clearly there are those who are already plugged into the system and are confident in finding effective routes to connect and tackle issues of concern to them. However, very many do not engage, or do not have the confidence, know-how or capacity to even voice their opinions, and to understand the necessary engagement with the system in order to meet their needs is therefore completely beyond their reach. The appreciation of the debilitating effects of empowerment strategies that fail to reach beyond the 'usual subjects' to those most in need is identified across the research sample. This once again highlights the insider, outsider and bridging features.

In conclusion then, comparing and contrasting the findings relating to barriers to a sense of power, many themes have emerged that traverse sectors. However, some limits are only experienced by particular sectors. Examples of limitations that are felt directly by community sector representatives and residents in particular, include experiences of discrimination, repression and racism. Large organisations acknowledge these issues and some attempt to address them through policy and practice. Nevertheless, they do not necessarily have to live with the detrimental effects of these inequalities. Capacity building for officers is identified as

necessary by those statutory organisations wishing to engage with the public. However, a culture change for residents **and** officers is also recommended as necessary to overcome the historical barriers experienced by both. Freire's empowerment of the disaffected does not tackle the re-education of the powerful, which is emerging in this study from those without power as well as those in positions of power. Whilst Freire (2000: p.163) does describe cultural synthesis and dominant class leaders joining the oppressed in an act of solidarity, the shared beliefs across the classes and sectors are perceptible and the melting of the dominant : dominated dichotomy apparent.

The remaining limitations described in this chapter find common ground across the sample, the differences lying in scale and impact. The effectiveness of the empowering structures that exist are limited by the issues described here, and are experienced across the sectors, ranging from the personal and local, to the public and global.

Mindful of the continuing cycle of poverty and alienation, an appreciation of the barriers to empowerment offers potential opportunities to break the cycle and address the psychological and structural barriers to empowerment. Understanding these factors can impact on how best to adjust strategy and action, and the way these obstacles can be overcome. It also enables lessons to be learnt in order to short-circuit prolonged and frustrating learning experiences. Activists and officers identify that through an awareness of constraining forces they are better able to address them. As Healey (1997: p.49) suggests, it becomes possible to 'have power' which promotes transformation by changing the way we think, the rules and the flow of resources.

Global, national and local forces affect the context within which decision-making and activity take place. The demographics of the area of study, and the fact that the sample represents the experience of London as a global city are also significant to these findings. These forces evidently play a role in the way that the people interviewed see the world and operate within it, with most relating to

globalisation personally. People do not simply look at local issues in isolation. Instead there is a clear tendency to experience the global within the local, whether dealing with the alienation of new arrivals, or the marginalisation of established minority communities. Clearly there are sectoral differences, not least the direct experiences of inequality by the community. However, rather than a 'them and us' affair, the majority of barriers are far more nuanced. These reflections on the impact of limiting factors helps to recognise, understand and potentially address them.

The significance of opinion relating to community, place and globalisation will be taken up in the next chapter, looking at the multiple urban realities in the human and spatial geography of West London.



## **Chapter 11**

### **Community, Place and Globalisation**

#### **The global and the local**

## The global and the local

Confirmation of the co-existence of overlapping communities with multiplicity of meanings is apparent, understood and lived. Notions of place and complex urban realities are evident in the human and spatial geography of Acton and the London Borough of Ealing as described by activists and officers working with or from different communities. Participants associate place and space with perceptions of identity and culture, which is reflected in their understanding of and approaches to community empowerment. This section links the fact that there are new local spaces and opportunities to the structural constraints in the wider context. Pressures from globalisation are balanced by the opportunities to link across geographical boundaries for instance. The impact of the global changes at the local level is strongly experienced by communities in West London where globalisation effects empowerment.

The research has identified the importance of understanding London as a global city, showing how its inhabitants passively or dynamically experience globalisation. The research participants reflect on the positionality of the U.K. vis-a-vis the rest of the world and being global citizens. The fact that the sample community are so ethnically and culturally mixed not only reflects West London demographics, it also highlights the relationships and interests shared between the researcher (reflecting upon the literature review) and the researched. This section explores these manifestations of globalisation amongst West London's global community.

London is shaped by and is shaping global economic forces, with direct effects on the peopled city. This is evident in the areas of work with which many of the officers and activists are involved. The international, national and local implications of globalisation affect the frontline workers and activists directly. Youth and education workers describe the fatal clash between two relatively new arrivals to the U.K.<sup>52</sup>, and the tragic results faced by their families and society in confronting these challenges. With changing demographics and the associated opportunities

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<sup>52</sup> The two young men (described elsewhere) who had come to the U.K. recently from Jamaica and Somalia.

and pressures, the difficulties faced by citizens and the government are enormous. The ever shifting challenges demand proactive and inclusive communication and engagement.

Within the context of local governance and globalisation there are links between the global and the local, with implications for communities in West London. Representatives from national and local politics, educationalists, resident action groups and refugee support organisations describe the social and economic divisions in society in line with Held and McGrew's (2000: p.58) account of the ordering of power relations across and between global sites of power, and found within and between social groups and institutions. Here new patterns of inequality and wealth emerge under new interregional economic relations and the associated global division of labour evident in local demographics and global dynamics. The people who describe this parallel existence in their interviews work with the excluded, the marginalised, the deprived, the unemployed and those in poverty. The polarisation of wealth at a global level is also evident at the local level described by Castells (2000: p.352) as the differential evolution of inequality.

This research has evidenced local, national and international agendas of participation and partnership which are disrupting traditional forms of political and social engagement. This agenda, emerging from inside and outside traditional arenas is generating new public spaces for participation in decision-making and political debate. This is impacting on communities and officers at a neighbourhood and government level, as the local and global agendas converge. Examples of where this is taking place include the current work being taken on by the Tallo Information Centre, London Borough of Ealing Community Cohesion Unit and Acton Community Forum's Tariqat Project which addresses the Preventing Violent Extremism agenda; falling clearly in the global-local framework, involving international, national and local agencies and efforts. This project is calling upon the expertise and local knowledge of grassroots organisations in an effort to confront community tensions, address experiences of alienation and tackle international terrorism.

Acknowledging the complexity of power dynamics that transform the global and local political arenas, many interviewees understand this bigger picture. Representatives from refugee rights organisations in particular have this dynamic at the forefront of their work and lives. Other frontline professionals working in the community grasp the impact of wider forces on local experiences, which also inform the practice of the statutory sector officers. These views tally with Kothari's (2001: p.141) view of 'position' and 'experiences' affecting understanding as well as socio-cultural practices; a notion that is being developed through this research .

Castells' (2000: p.352) assessment of global capitalism creating polarised experiences of power, wealth and equality has been applied to my research context by identifying references to such polarisation. Diverse actors have demonstrated their views concerning the notion of power as fluid, as well as experiencing the polarity of existence within the global city, whilst finding empowering solutions that cut through perceived and real barriers. Across the sample there is agreement on the reality of inequality on a global scale, despite differing views on causality and approaches to addressing it. There are also implications for the articulation and experience of power.

Robin's (2000: p.201) analysis of globalisation resulting from the complex interplay of economic and cultural dynamics involving 'confrontation, contestation and negotiation' is specifically relevant. The international links experienced within local arenas reflect the impact of globalisation at a neighbourhood level, with established and newly arrived communities adding to the multi-layered and complex patterns of people and power. This research illustrates participants' views on the changing manifestations of power and its impact, with the contemporary world order and globalisation affecting the exercise and experience of power in the local. These dynamics impact and inform solutions to local empowerment with global connections.

Associated with experiences of globalisation is the notion of Diaspora, connecting the global with the local. The idea of communities on the move, with the networks

and connectivity this generates is pertinent to many of the people interviewed. There is direct reference to the experience of Diaspora by the African-Caribbean participants who describe direct knowledge of Marcus Garvey's Black Star Liner, the Caribbean Commonwealth experience and the U.K. Black British reality. These lived experiences impact strongly on their sense of struggle, identity, power and empowerment.

From another global perspective, and as an Afghan who endeavours to support refugee communities, Saabir clearly has a global take on power. His personal and organisational focus has shifted with the changing international and local needs of Afghans. In response to global political changes, there has been a change in emphasis from one that is political and lobbying in nature, to one that is social and cultural.

"This is an independent Society; the first time it was established was 1982. At that time it was the Russian invasion of Afghanistan. At that time we established the Society and also our political activities were going on. When the Russians were defeated, our Society would be changed. We became a charity. Mostly at the time it was established it was not totally political, because some things we did were political. We did demonstrations ... against the Russian Embassy. Some part of the Society will be political, but not totally. But after 1987 this would be totally social, non-political. Social and cultural, because we want to help our people. We want to help our people who come from Afghanistan." (Saabir)

Comprehending the micro and the macro, Saabir appreciates the relativity of power experienced within and between people, to that within and between nations. Understanding the complexity of power that transforms global and local political arenas is particularly relevant for the refugee rights organisations informing this research.

From another perspective Charlie emphasises the fact that the Police Authority staff have to be apolitical as Servants of the Crown. However, he goes on to explain the international, national, London-wide, borough-wide and neighbourhood-

level structures that influence policing. Charlie raises the point that with concern over international terrorism, these agendas impact on local policing priorities, budgets and personnel. More recently, Preventing Violent Extremism policy is influencing policing. Clearly, the impact of international concerns affects neighbourhood level policing and the need for an appreciation of wide-ranging issues is evident. Central government control also impacts on policing priorities.

“I mean ultimately we are not even employees, we are Crown Servants. So we do what the Crown says. As the various Police Authorities, or Police Constables at various Constabularies across the country are finding at their cost at the moment. If the Home Secretary wants them to merge with bigger forces it just takes an Act of Parliament to do it. So consequently, in terms of power, that comes from parliament because we discharge the Law of the Land as it were. Some of those laws are fairly archaic, some are quite dynamic and modern in terms of the way we work with partners now. I mean things may change. Local authorities have a great deal of power and obviously we are involved in their Crime Reduction Partnerships. But certainly if the Home Secretary turned round and said ‘Well actually, we’re going to have this’, and have a change of parliament to achieve that, then that’ll happen.” (Charlie)

Despite new spaces for empowerment, recognition of the limits imposed by historical and economic legacies are nevertheless understood, with local efforts to empower communities and effect change juxtaposed against national and global forces. Such an understanding of the limits of one’s power and the extent of one’s influence within the wider forces of control is expressed across the sample. Dillan’s work in planning policy is directly affected by forces beyond his influence at a national level, and he must balance different priorities and interests.

“When you start talking about ‘ultimate’, one could say that the regulatory power and the executive power that the council has, although they are pretty powerful, are only there to influence the much bigger players: the multinational companies, the national government, the Mayor of London’s office, which have got even bigger multi-million pound budgets to spend.

One would hope that certainly national government and the Mayor of London's Office, being democratically elected organisation will be benign. And one would hope that the business multinationals who are spending their money would be as aligned as possible to peoples' market needs. But of course they are pretty blunt instruments in many cases and in putting forward their projects about how they spend their money; they can have significant impacts on local people and local communities. So one could say that what the council is trying to do in a somewhat limited way is to try and nudge the decisions of the much bigger players into a way in which they are not only less harmful, but that they actually do contribute positively to the community interests in the borough. This whole idea about partnership and stakeholders ... I mean the idea of that is to try and align so that individual decisions of big players, big money, so that as far as possible, it can be congruent with the different needs of the community." (Dillan)

The experience of displacement by dispersed ethnic and cultural communities is also identified by many with experiences that link the global city and the lived experiences of communities of people within that city. These issues are raised by those with personal knowledge of this displacement, or through working with displaced communities. Mahamad emphasises the link between international and national forces affecting the everyday lives of local people, and vice-versa where refugee communities concern for 'back home' impacts on their displaced experiences in the U.K.. People's sense of identity and their perception of self both in the local and with ties across the globe connects with the concept and experience of Diaspora, pulling together the connection of the individual with the community, the local with the global, globalisation with the community and having clear implications for empowerment.

## **Chapter 12**

### **Change:**

**The perception – practice cycle**

**Shifts in perspectives over time:**

**Awareness within defined parameters**

**Relative stability of perception**

**Modified approaches**

**Changing perception**

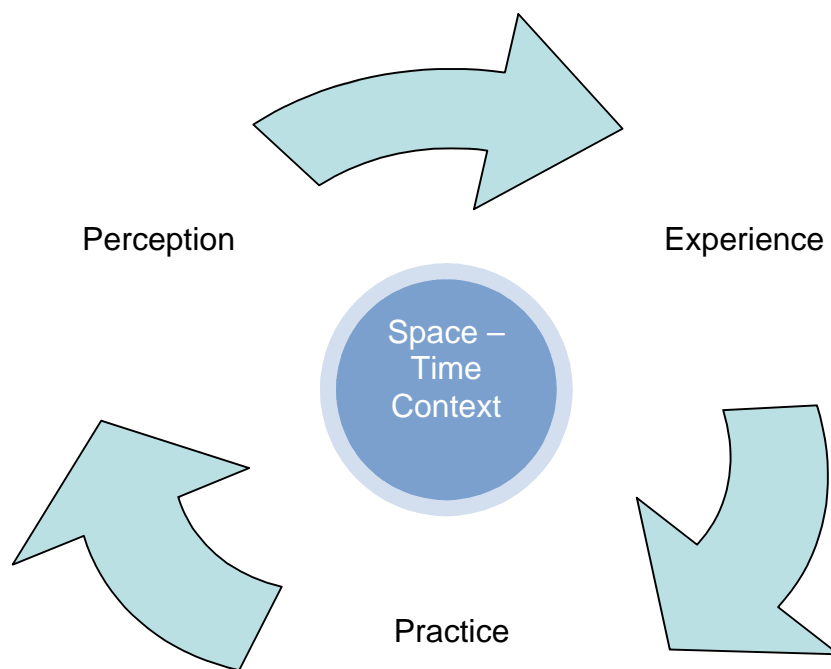
**Political and personal change**

**Closing comments on shifts in perception**



## The perception – practice cycle

This chapter explores change. Practitioners approaches to empowerment are analysed, initially looking at the relationship between perception and practice and then by an examination of shifts in opinion over time. The focus on change provides an opportunity to identify any trends, issues or lessons from activists' experiences. Beginning with an examination of people's views and their experience in promoting community empowerment, it is essential to consider how these affect their practice and consequently influence their perspective. In order to achieve this the characteristics of those participating in the research are examined, together with investigation into how this impacts on their practice. The cyclical process of change can be symbolically represented as follows:



Perception – Practice cycle of change

This sequencing enables the appreciation of the consequences of change in the process of empowerment, within a particular space–time context. The arrangement also demonstrates the cyclical nature of change, with perception informed by practice, practice informed by experience, and experience informed by

perception. This model highlights the consequences of the temporal and spatial context on the evolution of understanding and action, and goes some way to framing the process of community empowerment and transformation.

Beginning with an analysis of the significance of values, the research findings reveal personal beliefs and professional approaches that thread through peoples' lives and work. The selection of people from a variety of backgrounds and fields of specialism enables a wide range of experiences to emerge, providing different perspectives on community, power and empowerment. These are personal accounts that reveal opinion, ways of being and seeing the world and shed new light on my area of interest. The responses exemplified below reveal individual value systems and qualities that connect perception with practice.

So, for example, Ahmed is driven by the fact that politics is in his blood; for Efia it is family; whilst for Mahamad, his core inspiration is spirituality. These values inform the personal, political and practical paths chosen and have led to long term commitment to work towards change in line with these principles.

"I came from a fairly academic background you know, family that were extremely study orientated. Even though my mother at that time didn't do a degree, at that time she was a nurse and she spent many years studying. My father ... used to be a radio officer for the Black Star Line, one of the first radio officers for the Black Star Line that Marcus Garvey set up. So he was one of their products. They had interesting lives and they instilled this sense of 'to achieve.'" (Efia)

Garvey's movement was based on racial pride and the upliftment of the African race out of slavery, and these principles underpinned his beliefs, those of his organisation U.N.I.A.<sup>53</sup> (of which the Black Star Line was one venture) and those who were part of it.

Comprehension of the extent of the problem of social inequality is a starting point for action for many as described below by Naomi. These value systems form the

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<sup>53</sup> United Negro Improvement Association.

foundation of her commitment to bring about positive change, with the motivation emanating from the pervasiveness of inequality.

“... authority structures such as the police, the criminal justice system. You’re well below zero. Its minus, minus, when it comes to allowing accessibility and power within their decision-making structure, particularly for young people. So the authority structures of the police and education, they need to be able to allow young people into the core decision-making structures of education to be able to understand and address the issues that are arising.” (Naomi)

The links between motivations and practice are strong amongst the sample. This is evident for example when Bari describes the way his perspective, expectations and ambitions have evolved and how this has influenced his practice.

“Initially, the world was going to change very quickly because they’d see sense. And I’ve learned that it’s not going to, and not anything like as quickly as I’d like it to. In fact not even my area is going to change anything like I’d like it to. Not even my own company will do it the way that I envision it. But I’ve got to live with that, however, keep working with it and keep having new visions I think. It’s how I get through it. The day I stop believing that we’re going to make it, I’ll quit. Retire to the sea or something. I hope I am as passionate as I was. I hope I’m as optimistic as I was. I hope I’m as idealistic as I was. I think many of those things I still am. But I think I’m more realistic as well and the sense of time has changed. I won’t expect it next week, I won’t even expect it next year, I’ll be thinking in five-year blocks.” (Bari)

Equally, practice is linked to perception. The culture change facing officers is increasingly towards accountability and transparency, each impacting on ways of communicating and working with the community. Here Donald describes how things were different in the past, and that now people’s personal approach and professional practice is changing in line with new policies which are in turn changing officers’ attitudes.

“‘Tenants participation is everybody’s job.’ Not just ours. Thank God. So I don’t have to do it. So that’s definitely been a noticeable change.” (Donald)

Effective action is described as the most rewarding outcome for frontline professionals as well as activists who express the positive results achieved through effort and involvement in transformation. One feeds the other as action and belief converge. This reinforces motivations whilst enabling participants to reflect and adjust their approaches over time. Jai describes this and reflects upon the way that his views and tactics have changed over time.

“... from the time I took over, to the time I left A.V.T.R.A., there’s not so much a power shift, there’s a better working relationship rather than any power situation.” (Jai).

In summary, across the spectrum of actors there are strongly felt personal drivers that provide the stimulus for active engagement, guiding people’s life choices and steering them into particular socio-political or public service professions and/or community activity. There is evidence of these perspectives influencing practice and context affecting strategy in the pursuit of empowerment and positive change.

When comparing the inter-relationships of perception and practice across the sectors, evidence of the impact of personal values on professional approaches can be seen. The degree to which people are motivated by their founding principles in relation to the sector in which they operate is particularly relevant. There is a distinct pattern emerging whereby the private and public sector workers interviewed bring their personal beliefs into the professional structures within which they work. However, they are of course limited by the constraints within which they function. By contrast, the community and voluntary sector representatives are able to focus more freely and explicitly on their principles. They are nevertheless clearly limited by different sorts of constraints. The second-tier representatives and organisations form a bridge between the sectors, with the potential to play a negotiating role and identify where solutions can be found. This supports my

hypothesis that there may be common ground across the sectors embodied by bridging individuals and organisations.

The context within which one operates, whether hedged by institutional constraints (experienced by officers), or by historical inequalities (experienced by activists), has an impact on people and their practice. Adapting to diverse environments and priorities, whilst balancing competing and conflicting demands, is clearly a challenge. This challenge appears to be most constructively met once again by those who have understanding and experience of both the community and statutory sectors. Sinéad and Sally demonstrate this in that they both emerged from estate-based struggles and have moved into positions of relative power where they can now influence life experiences for other families. Similarly Mahamad and Ahmed have both experienced the struggles of life as a refugee and have translated that understanding into supporting others. For these actors, change has involved enormous personal transformation that has influenced the way they operate, whilst retaining empathy and appreciation.

## **Shifts in perspective over time**

A particular area of interest is the degree to which and the way power have changed with time, revealing some useful insights into personal and political transformation. Analysing these shifts sheds light on the relationship between awareness and practice, together with how these have been tempered and sharpened with time and experience. The examination of changes in perception requires a distinction to be made between shifts in peoples' experiences of power, their analysis of power and the tactics that they adopt in response to this. It is the interplay of these elements that influences the enactment of power and empowerment.

Models of change in the literature can be usefully applied to this study and assist in the analysis of change. For instance, dynamic shifts in empowerment are described by Gaventa (2003c: p.8) and are relevant to the location of research participants'. He demonstrates change through actors' position in relation to different degrees of visibility (visible, hidden or invisible), place (arenas with local, national or global engagement) and space (power arenas via provided/closed, invited or claimed/created routes).

Making sense of change is akin to photographing a moving object. The observer's opinion is in flux, the subject's conceptions are continuously shifting and research attempts to freeze this motion in order to make sense of the snap-shot in the evolution of opinion. This research endeavours to capture something that is always in progress and to make sense of this process.

What has become apparent is that all of those involved in this research have experienced change in events/context and perception/opinion. The difference lies in the degree to which this is experienced. A spectrum of responses is apparent whereby all of the actors have shifted in different ways and to different degrees. Interesting patterns in perception have emerged across the sample. Some have moved from a position of feelings of powerlessness and feeling they cannot make

a difference to a position of finding ways they feel that they can. Others began by feeling that they could make a big difference and have tempered their views over time. With greater understanding of the constraints to empowerment, they have learned how to manage these constraints and create other ways to address disempowerment.

Below I demonstrate how the research sample's perception of power has changed. The following areas have emerged: awareness within defined parameters; relative stability of perception; modification of views; changing perception; and political and personal change.

#### Awareness within defined parameters

Those research participants who work towards empowerment within the confines of a restricting environment, express how this has limited their vision of power. From the statutory sector there is evidence of working towards change within defined parameters, where institutional power structures remain a controlling factor and ways of operating are delineated by these limitations. The very nature of public service means that officers have to work within decision-making hierarchies and controls. Working to national and local targets, within tight structures of accountability, officers describe their perceptions of power as firmly embedded within these restrictions and constrained by the context within which they operate. Their perspective explained below.

Charlie's view of power has evolved as he has gained more himself, with a steady progression throughout his career. As a rank structured organisation the police-force has a clear hierarchy of control. As Charlie has worked his way through the hierarchy his powers have grown and this has changed not only his experiences but his appreciation of power has become more refined. Charlie emphasises that it is the change in his situation rather than his perception that is significant here.

“... over time I’ve got more power because I’ve gone from P.C., to Sergeant, to Inspector. So in that sense it has shifted because of my personal circumstances if you like. ... Because the world’s changing and I think the world where someone’s word would be taken at face value, or because someone is such-and-such whatever they say goes - I think that’s changed, because people are more scrutinised than they were before.” (Charlie)

Dillan has worked within the local authority for many years during which time he has refined his appreciation of power and how to operate within this. Clear about the wider forces of national and local influence, Dillan knows his role and the extent of his influence. Through an intimate knowledge of the system and what structures can be utilised, Dillan quietly exerts influence over his area of jurisdiction. It is interesting to note that by consistently influencing change from within and working inside the local authority framework, Dillan has, in his view, succeeded in bringing about changes in the decision-making structures that enable enhanced community input into planning decisions.

Similarly, Donald has seen a huge shift in the way the local authority housing department has changed from being inaccessible and uninviting to their tenants into a publicly accountable, resident-led service operating as an A.L.M.O.. Donald has witnessed this change and feels that the move toward answerable service delivery has altered the approach of officers, and also considers his approach has altered. Very much affected by the operating systems and accountability structures of the organisation he works in, Donald’s perspective and ways of working have adapted accordingly, feeling more comfortable working within a more open and honest framework.

“Yes I think since I started this sort of work a long time ago, I’m talking twenty years ago, I can’t remember that there was tenant-led anything. There never would have, it wouldn’t have entered their head. And so there’s been a huge shift, quite rightly. And that’s very extreme but if you look at it that way, even if you look at the last five, six, seven years, I think more and more it’s not just paying lip-service to it, because you wouldn’t get away with



that. You would have to prove that you are listening to tenants and that they are empowered.” (Donald)

In a somewhat different trajectory Sinéad has come from a position of powerlessness, to aspirations of community power, and full circle to a sense of having little influence. Her organisation (Sure Start) was established in response to the government aim to alleviate child poverty within a ten year period. This programme began with high hopes and vision, and has been reduced to small steps and limited achievements. Dealing with this, Sinéad has reconfigured her views and works tirelessly to create opportunity within imposed constraints. Personally, Sinéad has moved from feeling herself a powerless parent, to a position of volunteer parent with hopes of positive change, to a worker in a parent-led independent organisation, and ultimately to a council officer as the organisation became mainstreamed. This personal journey interestingly mirrors her views on power from powerless to empowered, to powerful and ultimately back to a sense of being with little power.

“I know about being powerless. In fact my achievements are nicking away at small shifts of power are much less than my original ambitions of building a community centre and having community power. And now, I’m happy if they acknowledge that we can use it at a certain time. Great! That’s fine by me. So my ambitions are much less in terms of how much power we have over things.” (Sinéad)

Actors are located on Gaventa’s (2003c: p.8) model where they are engaging with visible levels of power, operating with local, national or global engagement and where power arenas are provided/closed or invited. Having established this position, further layers of complexity are evident and need to be factored in.

These testimonies describe the impact of powerful, controlling forces on local authority officers. Where national and local policy guidelines involve empowerment, their community empowerment work is enhanced; whereas disempowering directives impact negatively on empowerment opportunities. Each

of these officers identifies the constraining frameworks within which they work and describes their influence. The present policy framework is evidently impacting on the work of council officers together with police officers and other officials, creating spaces that have the potential to support the devolution of power. Crucially, it is how these spaces and opportunities are managed and implemented that affect how valuable and meaningful change will be.

### Relative stability of perception

Amongst the interviewees there are those who do not think power has changed much over time and who have not changed their views on how to challenge power and promote empowerment. Those with this clear and constant view of power (described below) include the politician and corporate sector representatives whose positions allow for a certain degree of freedom of expression. Despite some obvious differences in life experience and profession, they have a comprehensive and relatively stable perception of power. In these cases the actors are visible, operate in arenas with local, national or global relevance and populate provided/closed, invited and claimed/created spaces (Gaventa, 2003c: p.8).

Ahmed's life is testament to his personal journey from experiencing the powerlessness of living in a Palestinian refugee camp in the Middle East, to becoming a powerful politician influencing decisions in the Houses of Parliament in the U.K.. Despite his ethical wrangling over some government decisions (notably the judgment to go to war with Iraq) and structures (such as the role of the whip in parliamentary decision-making), Ahmed has maintained a stable approach to empowerment: one that has consistently sought to access power and influence decision-making on local and international affairs via party political engagement. It should be noted however, that challenges to his principle beliefs and in particular relating to the issues closest to his heart (the Middle East and the Iraq war) have perhaps shaken his confidence in democracy.

Anthony sees power as a framework within which we operate and as such he too functions within these parameters. Understanding the broader influences on behaviour and the enactment of power, Anthony's perception is affected by this structure and the context within which he is situated. Located at the meeting point of community, statutory and corporate sectors he has a clear appreciation of power which continues to inform his practice.

"I know that I've always thought of power as frameworks, and skeletons and innards. That is that there is a power framework that's established, which does shape and dominate behaviour. But it doesn't completely overtake behaviours as such." (Anthony)

Both of these actors illustrate a relative stability of perspective, informed by the principles utilised to comprehend power. Despite changes in environment and context there is nevertheless an appreciation that power may have been refined but has essentially remained constant and stable.

### Modified approaches

The majority of the research sample thinks that power has not changed, although its expression and the context have and in turn they have developed more complex and sophisticated ways of engaging and negotiating with power. Experience has generated a greater appreciation of power dynamics and how to adapt to its new manifestations. Evidence of growing cynicism has emerged from a range of different actors who describe the experience of an increasingly sceptical view of power as exposure to encounters with the powerful which generated mistrust and an awareness of hidden agendas. How these feelings are channelled varies in a number of ways; some people resigned to it and others fighting it. Some people are developing an increasingly measured approach, whilst others retain their enthusiasm to challenge controlling systems in favour of empowering opportunities. Illustrations of actors modified analyses and approaches follow.

Sam's view of power is rooted in his familial understanding that asks him to treat others with respect and expects that this should be reciprocated. He brings this perspective into all aspects of his life and work with a large R.S.L.<sup>54</sup>, although finds its application more difficult the more powerful a person becomes, and in his experience their motives become questionable. Sam acknowledges a growing scepticism in parallel with changes in his perception and experience.

"I suppose power and all those kind of things are sort of all entwined. ... You start to think that's a heck of responsibility and an enormous amount of power. ... You know those are the sort of things I think more of now than maybe I did before." (Sam)

Community worker Sean was cynical about authority at sixteen and is cynical now, continuing to question people's agendas. Equalities issues have remained central to his belief, although his way of tackling them has changed from confrontational in the 1970's to strategic in the 2000's. The distinction between concepts of power and the strategies to challenge power is evident.

"If anything I've probably become more cynical in terms of other people's agendas, but also more skilled at working with them." (Sean)

Reflecting on how he has changed his attitude to power, environmental activist Mathew describes how he has become more considered, strategic and adaptable in his approach. He weighs up the different options, his strengths and his opposition's weaknesses and works towards achieving positive results by whatever means necessary. Mathew would like to short-circuit slow moving, bureaucratic processes that have resulted in his burgeoning cynicism, combined with his developing flexibility. His enthusiasm, however, has not changed.

"Well I try and enthuse the local politicians, which doesn't seem to work. .... You know I want nothing out of this. I just want it to happen. And you don't get any enthusiasm. I've become rather cynical."

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<sup>54</sup> Registered Social Landlord.

“... the battle we had, I think we won it by a softly, softly approach, the lawyer and myself. ... I mean ‘horses for courses.’ I think you can fight hard. You know I was being encouraged by members to fight hard and get people to lie down in front of the Park Club. Well I didn’t think it was time for that. Yes, in the future if something happened, yes I would take direct action probably. I think direct action is quite good if relevant.” (Mathew)

Charlotte feels that there has been a change in her perception of power. In the past she trusted people’s intentions were generally worthy and that they operated with integrity. With time and experience she has come to conclude that this is not necessarily true. Charlotte feels that people, organisations and governments have agendas which are not always for the ‘greater good.’ Her optimistic nature and enabling role with Extended Schools sustain her despite this realisation, demonstrating a shift in her perception of power.

“I can remember a time when I trusted people. It’s cute really. I think about when I was a child and you trust your parents, who are powerful. You feel that government, the British Government, is broadly benign in its intent. And increasingly I think materialism, self-seeking, undermines my faith in where power lies.” (Charlotte)

Others describe changes in their awareness and behaviour over time, expressing how they have become less challenging in their approach. It is clear that with experience, maturity and reflection a considered approach that is open to debate and negotiation is a viable option that has often reaped greater rewards than a head-on dispute. This is particularly evident in the case of the Acton Vale based activists and officers described below. For Jai, resident association activist, there has been a change in the way he operates from confrontation to negotiation. His early experience of tackling authority was to challenge, whereas he has adapted over the years to a more tempered approach that is open to compromise.

“I suppose I got slightly less confrontational in my approach from the beginning, to a more negotiated way of working towards the end. But if I have to I know in reserve I’ve got the fire in me to be a little bit more

confrontational if I need to, but only if I have to. And I think officers know that, or the people I'm working with, with the council or the members, do know that I have something in reserve." (Jai)

Sally has not changed her fundamental views, although she has changed the way she sees herself. From early involvement voluntarily as a young mother, to play worker, youth worker, currently managing youth provision and as a community advocate, she reflects that her approach has become more refined and focused with experience.

"...my acceptance that there are some parts that I can't necessarily have influence over. I don't think you should just ignore it, but sometimes it's about picking where you go and how you do things to get to your ultimate goal." (Sally)

This ability to adapt to the changing contexts of power is something shown quite clearly in this research, and will be examined in depth in the next chapter. The capacity to adjust to the evolving political climate and address opportunities offered by the altering policy context is raised by South Acton representatives in particular, including the following illustrations from the resident action group, neighbourhood renewal officer and community organiser.

Khenan has retained a collective view of popular power throughout his life and this has informed his life choices. What has altered, however, is the way he adapts to the changing context within which he operates. The shifting political terrain, policy framework, public consciousness and campaigning approach have influenced the way Khenan tackles each new situation. Currently he is grappling with the shift of S.A.R.A.G. from a tenant representative activist organisation that agitates, to one that has a management and enterprise role. This crucial change is one that Khenan is rationalising as the organisation develops and tries to retain its ethos whilst transforming.

"Is S.A.R.A.G. going to dissolve itself into becoming the managing agency as is done in many instances? You see what happens if S.A.R.A.G.

committee transforms itself from being a representative organisation, which is what it is at the moment you know - agitational. ... An activist organisation to becoming the managerial organisation. And the view that I have been expressing is that as far as I am concerned, this thing will have to move into a two-track thing. There has got to be retention of the representative organisation when the thing is transformed. .... So that in fact it can ... keep a watch over the new regime. In some places they transform themselves completely into the managerial entity and therefore they lose that cutting-edge of the continuing watchfulness and the representational role, and I think that that's a mistake." (Khenan)

Khenan's reflections upon the increasing opacity and complexity of power, and how the residents' action group and the community sector roles are changing is revealing, and demonstrates the way that this process alters the function and character of the sector in quite fundamental ways. This point is reiterated by representatives from the voluntary sector, particularly within the new policy context and under the recent commissioning process encouraging voluntary sector service delivery. Adapting to change and opportunities for empowerment is important but it is essential not to lose touch with founding principles. The implication is the need to balance this process carefully where there seems to be some very fine lines to be drawn between being flexible on the one hand, and losing focus and mission on the other.

Experience has similarly informed neighbourhood officer Earl's view of power. He has seen the way power has been viewed, used and abused. He also describes the way that people deal with power differently now, with a more proactive approach evident across the sectors.

"You see that in the private sector, in politics and the community, all these areas have moved over the years in the way that people exercise power. It's much more toned down and people are beginning to recognise power is only a sense of governance of responsibility." (Earl)

Community activist in South Acton, Karina, has refined her understanding of power through her life. As a young woman she associated power with a more abstract Black Power movement and race issues. Now her view has become more explicit and directly applicable to her circumstances. She sees the way that this change in perception has altered her confidence and behaviour such that she has become more focused on empowering others.

“I can do things a lot differently, I can adapt and I can say things as well. Whereas before I wouldn’t have been able to articulate. Now I can assert myself in a very positive way. .... Having power and putting it over very positively does make a person, or does make an organisation.” (Karina)

These actors are located variously, operating within visible, hidden and invisible aspects of power, with local, national or global connectivity and operating via provided/closed, invited and/or claimed/created routes (Gaventa, 2003: p.8). None of these actors see power dynamics having changed over time. The way it is played out locally **is** seen as shifting and the ways they have modified their views and approaches has also moved in line. The changes in context and the challenges that they have faced have led to changes in their approach, testing their principles and practice in the pursuit of empowerment.

### Changing perception

A further appreciation of power is apparent, one that sees it as stable, whilst adjusting perception and practice over time. These illustrations provide a more extreme analysis of power than described in the previous section on modified approaches. This interpretation sees the dynamics of power as essentially unchanged and entrenched, with their views and approach changing and active over time. Those working with the most marginalised, one through therapeutic work and the other through tackling equalities issues, demonstrate this view. Both feel that fundamentally nothing changes and that discrimination, marginalisation and inequality are as prevalent now as in the past and that despite their work



towards empowerment these inequalities and problems persist. Both feel that unless this is addressed directly, change will remain slow and piecemeal, and disempowerment will continue.

Based on Gaventa's (2003c: p.8) model, these actors are operating at the visible level whilst representing those that are invisible, are linked through local, national or global connections and operate via provided/closed and invited spaces, whilst utilising claimed/created routes.

Race equality officer Naomi has a very clear view of an unchanging power. Her position is that there has always been racism and discrimination and there always will be. The impact on politics and society are evident in both the past and present. This has not stopped her working towards change, but her lasting feeling is that without a radical change in ways of thinking and operating by those with the power, then very little meaningful change is possible.

“No. It's always been white middle-class, and will always be white middle-class. It will always be white, middle-class and it doesn't matter about gender. Because, forgive me, but Trevor Philips? He hasn't got the final decision. Tony Blair has. And what Tony Blair says, goes. And it will never, ever change. As long as we continue the representation that we have at national government and local government, it will never, ever change.” (Naomi)

Education professional Bari appears to have gone full circle in his thinking: from a passionate young man suspecting a conspiracy theory thwarting projects that challenge discrimination; to working patiently to make things change; through to beginning to question whether there are indeed forces conspiring against change, in more sophisticated ways, but nonetheless present. Bari has refined his way of thinking with experience, becoming more patient and focusing on longer-term, achievable outcomes and shifting his approach accordingly. In parallel with this has been his appreciation of a change in the psyche of the powerful and powerless, such that previous diametric opposition has evolved into a more subtle

and penetrating acceptance of the mainstream way of thinking. Bari's ability to analyse the changes in context and philosophy has enabled him to operate consciously, although fully aware of the limiting forces that affect empowerment and progress. Bari's frustration at the persistence of inequality is apparent, acknowledging that despite the changes in his view of empowerment, the problems have remained.

"It's not quite as simplistic as that, that they're all meeting behind our backs without our knowledge, but there is a buying into of a sort of mainstream 'way of being' that is conspiratorial and that shuts other people out and doesn't let them in. So I'm saying I've changed, but perhaps I haven't that much. But yeah, things change, environments change and all that sort of thing, but the major problems don't. People are as racist as they were, as sexist as they were, disabled people still have as tough a time as they did, and sexuality has got worse as far as I can see, the tolerance and acceptance of it, you'd get killed if you came out in some schools. So we are still dealing with the same shit." (Bari)

This perspective maintains a radical challenge to inequality and disempowerment, whilst seeing the forces and effects of power as unchanging. Inequality may become manifest in different guises, but ultimately persists. The challenge to this ongoing injustice is to demonstrate alternatives, whilst promoting and advancing fundamental change.

### Political and Personal Change

In terms of the inter-relationship of the personal and the political, the life experiences of Saabir, Efi and Mahamad show a notable correlation. The challenges that they have each encountered have shaped the people they have become. Here, the changes in the political and public landscape are bound to the private and personal terrain. In particular, the connection between vision and action is strongly expressed here.

Saabir has witnessed a great deal in his life, and at nearly eighty his views on power have altered. As a young man in Afghanistan he struggled against the Russian Invasion, and later as a refugee in the U.K. he continued his fight for change in Afghanistan. He then shifted to a cultural agenda, alongside supporting refugees in the U.K.. These changes have affected Saabir's focus from practical and political, to social and informational. As an older man he can offer experience and knowledge, whilst he now feels it is down to the younger generation to initiate new ideas and take a lead. Saabir's political journey and environment has clearly affected his personal priorities. Changing from a campaigning organisation to an information and cultural one; from a political activist addressing international issues to a community organiser supporting refugees within the UK context; from a young freedom-fighter and campaigner to an elder advisor: Saabir has gone through changes politically and personally.

“Here, power will change because we want to train our young people. Because the old people are ... I am an old man, I cannot do anything now. Only to give advice: ‘do this, this, this.’ From our experience because I am now 76. .... We can't put anything new. This is for the young people. The young people must do this; the young people are the new leaders. This is our opinion.” (Saabir)

Efia expresses the way that her perception has changed as her experiences have impacted on her life. She describes the effects of the political context, funding insecurity, organisational structures, inter-personal dynamics and personal politics on the way she understands and experiences power. She frames her political stance within the wider temporal shifts, and feels less ambitious than in her early activist days. However, she reflects on her personal experience and the wider political framework, and has honed her approach accordingly whilst in her view, remaining true to her vision. For Efia a holistic vision is upheld where these relationships are inseparable.

“So what is sad is you start something off and you have these grand ambitions. But ultimately because the politics has changed and central

government is impacting on local government, or local government is apparently misusing the funds, those aims and dreams you have do not necessarily fit any more.” (Efia)

Mahamad’s understanding of power has changed with the environment in which he is located. In Somalia, power is situated with individuals in his view, and this is how Mahamad experienced it. In the U.K. he sees a three-tiered system with the insecure powerless, the bridging organisations and the secure powerful. He has a clear vision focused on transcending this system by empowering himself and his community. With each step, his perception and experiences are affected as he gains greater power and influence by completing his degree, establishing projects, empowering others, developing his organisation and having a stronger voice in local and national arenas. Mahamad’s spirituality has also framed his understanding of a different sort of power, which has evolved with his personal development and spiritual understanding.

“It’s been changed in a way... We can always make changes. It depends how you handle the time, of knowing the right person, or talking to the right person, or spreading what can bring change. But in a sense, from my personal growth, things change, and it changes with individual growth, spiritually and knowledgably. Then yeah, it changes myself and also the responsibility of things can be changed.” (Mahamad)

This holistic view of power combines the spiritual, personal and political, taking on board the effects of the global context on the local arena through private stories. This stance links back to these actors’ views concerning the notion of power where the interconnection of the personal and political is paramount. Adapting Gaventa’s (2003c: p. 8) power cube, for these actors a shift from invisible to visible, from global to local (whilst retaining a global-national-local overview and linkages) and from claimed/created routes to invited routes has occurred. The enactment and significance of globalisation are relevant in this instance.

## **Closing comments on shifts in perception**

This chapter has described the different ways that people have, or have not, changed their views about power, as well as their approach to empowerment over a certain period of time. There is evidence of a variety of perspectives which is indicative of the different characters, perspectives, contexts and experiences. The diverse views on power, varying thoughts and approaches have been evidenced. There is no straight forward division between officers and activists. Instead an intricate narrative has emerged. These findings relate to the dissolving of boundaries between sectors described earlier. They also reveal which conditions and characteristics most effectively enable empowerment in the view of key participants.

Utilising Gaventa (2003c: p.8) power cube in order to map the actors' location and movement has demonstrated the impact of different starting points, influences and arenas. The three dimensional model takes on board many of the variables discussed in this chapter. What is perhaps more problematic is where experiences are more complex and dynamic.

The implications of the ways people adapt and change their ways of understanding and operating is more multifaceted and sophisticated than initially envisaged. The complexities of reality trigger changes in perception. That subsequently impacts on practice and refers back to the 'perception–practice cycle of change' model described earlier in the chapter. These findings confirm my observation of the ability to adapt to changes in circumstance nurturing the capacity to engender community empowerment. The dynamic nature of empowerment does not necessarily lead to power where disillusionment and negative outcomes prevail. However one can draw relevant conclusions concerning the most effective empowerment opportunities and routes to power from this exploration of the shifts in perspective over a period of time.

## **Chapter 13**

### **Governance and Policy**

**Political engagement**

**Balancing the tensions**

**Governance**

## **Political engagement**

The era in which this research has taken place is one in which New Labour's ideology has affected political, public and private life. With the 2010 general election looming, this is a time for reflection on what has been achieved during this period, the emerging lessons and what remains to be done. This penultimate chapter looks at devolution, governance and the policy context. This will be examined through perspectives on political engagement, the challenges of balancing these pressures and the impact on practice. Participation policy and empowerment initiatives aim to bring government and citizens closer together, and with this comes new ways of relating and working for both. My argument is that although this interface is proving to be fraught with challenges, it has the potential to empower and address the problems associated with alienation.

This first section will look at the extent to which power is shifting towards community through greater citizen involvement and political engagement. The role of debate and decision-making are considered, as is whether there is evidence of challenges to entrenched power dynamics. What opportunities exist for democracy and community involvement in West London's political arena afforded through 'external' support mechanisms? Respondents' views about democracy and participation in the political sphere bring the theoretical discussion into the realm of practical application. The ways the research sample understands and relates to democracy varies. Some participants make clear reference to the political context, whilst others make no mention at all. The following section will examine the management of the ensuing tensions that are associated with the emerging spaces for involvement. The final part will review governance and the changing government 'internal' engagement initiatives effect on practice.

In terms of political participation, there is recognition amongst respondents of the limits and potential of traditional representative democracy, participative approaches to democracy and their relevance in the light of current policy and practice. The politician, journalist and community activists amongst the sample

most clearly articulate their understanding of political participation. Environmental activist and journalist Mathew feels that stakeholder democracy addresses urban concerns better than the election of councillors affiliated to political parties, criticising the centrality of party politics.

“I’m a great believer that politically that it should revert to Independents representing people at local level, and not the party politics of any shape, because they’re just grinding an axe or doing what they are told, and I can’t believe they are so unimaginative as they are. ... But I do wish that it was the community that was empowered, rather than represented by a local politician.” (Mathew)

Evidence of committed individuals’ contributions to political participation is clear throughout the area of study. This fluidity of approach to political engagement could be harnessed more effectively so that this potential is not lost. Acknowledging and valuing the diverse ways that people actively engage with politics is a positive way to strengthen democracy and demystify politics. Individuals are actively learning how to organise, access information, articulate their concerns and engage politically.

“I didn’t know that I could go to the planning committee and speak for three minutes, until somebody tipped me off. Well, that should all be in a booklet you know, and it should be far more open. I mean I don’t even know how to stand, to be put up for locally, if I so wish. But all of us should know how it’s done.” (Mathew)

Whilst activists evidently strive for greater powers, there are also allies within the system (Taylor 2003: p.139) championing community participation.

As government responsibilities are devolved to self-governing voluntary associations, social change is taking place. By extending democratic control in a practical and local way, better-informed decisions and improved governance can be achieved. Examples where community organisations and activists use their local knowledge in the system of governance is demonstrated in the following cases. Acton Vale Community Association and Acton Community Forum both now



manage the Vale and Oaktree Community Centres, and S.A.R.A.G. is in the process of developing a T.M.O.<sup>55</sup> aspect of their work, taking on the service delivery and management of South Acton Estate, and are illustrations of local governance in action. Khenan describes the importance of building alliances, maintaining a political vision and working towards self-governance.

“...we have had to empower ourselves by simply acting, by winning collaboration, by winning solidarity, by joining the National Federation of T.M.O.’s and so forth.” (Khenan)

Political control at this local level becomes accessible, evident in the immediate area and an issue that people are no longer threatened by. Instead, with vision, information and support can embrace.

The identification by Craig and Watson (2000: p.515) of the desirability of excluded and marginalised communities to be involved in decisions that affect their lives is certainly embraced by community activists in this study. Equally important is the opportunity to address conflicts and the recognition that ‘one size does not fit all.’

The dangers of localism and concerns of un-representativeness have been raised in the literature as well as amongst the research sample, including problems of self-interest, single-issue campaigns and the prominence of the ‘usual suspects’ are challenges for neighbourhood representation. Transparent, supported and accessible routes to participation can enable a diversity of perspectives to be heard. This study reveals the struggles associated with involvement and representation. The Safer Neighbourhoods Police priorities are set with contributions from residents, although Charlie describes the difficulty when agenda-setting does not reflect the social mix. The identification of the challenge contributes to the tackling of it. Charlie explains the ways the Met<sup>56</sup> are attempting to involve the ‘hard to reach’.

“...you talk about community engagement, and avoiding the usual route, you do empower people who’ve never had any access with the police before: getting training, skills, opening the window in terms of employment

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<sup>55</sup> Tenant Management Organisation.

<sup>56</sup> The Metropolitan Police Authority.

opportunities. And also we get back views from the missing 99.9% of people we don't normally consult with." (Charlie)

Democratic involvement and citizenship have been placed high on the global, national and local agenda. The interests of international and government agencies over political engagement have their own agendas, which have been acknowledged. In particular the statutory and business sectors identify the role of political influence and agenda-setting as significant forces in the shift towards prioritising engagement. By way of a cautionary note, concerns over powerful agencies' control over decision-making are brought up by representatives from these sectors. Sam describes the challenges faced when balancing community and social concerns with economic and political pressures that affect residents' views about engagement.

"...if we are bringing new developments: we are talking to the wider community, the planners, contractors and stakeholders all the time and trying to influence their decisions and thinking about that. I mean especially in developments, you'll have a situation like you're going to have at the back of the Town Hall, where you have St. Georges<sup>57</sup> working up there. St. Georges have to supply 50% affordable accommodation. So what they will do from their perspective, because obviously they are about profit, so they will try and maximise the amount of money they can earn. And they will try and minimise the amount of affordable accommodation they are going to have to give." (Sam)

Maintaining an overview of economic and political influence over global and local decision-making delineates the extent of achievable influence, realistic accomplishments and limits to consequential participation in the political. Sam also highlights flaws in the democratic process that alienate the electorate and potential independent candidates from participation.

"I mean we have a local authority ward-based elective system that is predicated by two or three main parties. It's not that there's no election of those candidates, because obviously people vote at a local level. But it's

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<sup>57</sup> Property developers.

party politics as opposed to individuals. And obviously that predicates or stops certain people participating effectively. And obviously we still have 'first past the post' and all that kind of stuff. We don't do proportional representation. So we don't have a truly representative democratic system." (Sam)

Despite evidence of important limitations to meaningful political engagement, this research has identified how participants recognise where active participation and empowerment agendas are supported. Evidence of communities finding voice is supported by this research. Political awareness is demonstrated in the ways people have a stake in decision-making and a voice in political affairs. Illustrations show how people are taking up opportunities to participate in the political process. This study of the mechanisms and structures of involvement demonstrates the ways that people believe that meaningful inclusion can be achieved and the democratic deficit addressed. For example, Earl has extensive experience in the political realm, as a former councillor, and via working in the voluntary sector and Neighbourhood Renewal. Earl also understands and sees flaws in democratic processes, focusing on the effects of disenfranchisement on political engagement, and bureaucracy on service providers. He identifies the need to take on board broader issues and inequalities.

"...training people to get the best out of democracy. Also a lot of training not just for the politicians, but for the people on the ground, on how to get the best out of democracy. It's fine to say 'yeah, we've got democracy' but how does it work? Having been told what to do all their lives and suddenly to have to find out what to do....." (Earl)

National government commitment to consultation and participation is being taken forward at local authority level. Interestingly this references the need to take responsibility for embedding new ways of working and changing the local authority culture. This specific point has been raised by all sector representatives who identify the need to transform mind-sets and decision-making cultures. The A.L.M.O. officer notes the fact that those employees unable or unwilling to make

the change to resident leadership, transparency and greater accountability have voted with their feet and left the organisation. The N.R.F. service improvement coordinator describes the mechanisms that now hold service providers to account. The Youth and Connexions service now has to meet youth-led targets, administers a youth initiated grant programme, and is being actively encouraged to work in partnership to achieve these ends. This local authority culture change is evidently impacting on officers' approaches and ultimately affecting grassroots delivery. Clearly, the change is not embedded yet, but the structures are being put in place to enable this transition. Donald speaks about how officers deal with this culture change demanding greater accountability and transparency within his sector.

"I think if you were still here it would show by definition. And I think newer officers don't see it as an issue, it's sort of something that from the day they start they know that there is that responsibility on them. So yeah, if they didn't like it they probably wouldn't be here anymore." (Donald)

The Labour government's commitment to encouraging politically active citizens does have social and economic implications. The restoration of political vitality requires an open and responsive government with effective communication as central to public engagement. It has been acknowledged that politicians and public servants need to be in touch with public opinion in order to design and implement better policies and services. Statutory sector officers are charged with this challenge to meaningfully engage with the public. However, it is my thesis and the view of participants' that this can best be achieved through partnership working, supported by conscious bridging organisations and people with grassroots experience in positions of influence. Sean emphasises the centrality of interaction and communication for bridging organisations.

"There are structures, but it is relationships within those structures that are important." (Sean)

Engagement agendas have to initially address the fundamental issues of poverty and exclusion, which is stressed by the R.S.L. officer, who points to the effects of glaring social inequalities on the ability of residents to participate in anything

beyond survival strategies. The planning officer also acknowledges the fact that it tends to be the middle-classes with an active interest in planning that contribute to planning decisions. Whereas marginalised communities simply do not see this as a priority, unless of course their homes are scheduled for regeneration and / or demolition. Tackling these fundamental inequalities is beyond the reach of ad hoc empowerment initiatives and requires radical transformation. Sam expresses the basic inequalities that dominate life experiences for marginalised communities.

“There are some communities that are very effective, and you know, duck to water. Certainly some of the Asian community are used to that ... and have adapted it very effectively. But the Somali community or the Afro-Caribbean community who do not seem as keen, for probably very good reasons, not to engage in those kinds of structures, they’re often excluded from the whole process. So, not enough work done on those kind of things.” (Sam)

All respondents reference the need to look at the roots of poverty, social exclusion and their impact on the potential for active citizenship. Within the inner-city urban renewal context, frontline professionals **and** resident activists describe the effects of poverty. Governance from the perspective of local stakeholder involvement needs ‘bottom-up’ responses to socio-economic development. This has been described eloquently by both resident associations where the focus is on collective approaches to local issues, where residents understand the problems and wish to be involved in creating workable solutions. These solutions need to be supported structurally, culturally and economically if meaningful participation in political agenda-setting, decision-making and problem-solving is to be sustained.

Brock, Cornwall and Gaventa’s (2001: p.3) identification of autonomous spaces created from below via poverty-related social action can show how the policy process is framed by the interaction or exclusion of diverse actors. Clearly, issues of inclusion and exclusion have been identified as central to experiences of alienation and participation in this study.

However, networks based on shared meaning have the potential to impact on the political arena. These linking structures can result in social movements seen in the examples of campaigning organisations and community action. Their impact on politics, policies and people are observable in the area of study. Ahmed's personal and political journey demonstrates his understanding of power and the way he utilised links.

"Palestinian by Birth. British by Nationality. I started my political life at a very, very early stage with the Arab National Movement in the late 1950's. ... I decided to come back to England as a political refugee. When I first came I didn't want to be involved in politics, but it's in my blood. ... we decided that if the Arab voice should be heard we should organise ourselves first. While in the Labour Party I also met a few Arab members of the Labour Party and decided together to create Arab Labour Group; I am the Chair of this organisation." (Ahmed)

The increasing leverage of 'ordinary people' in decision-making is apparent, although doubts are also articulated regarding the parity of their input, and the extent of their influence. The findings point to the need to build on community strengths and expertise as part of the process of empowerment, which has been demonstrated in this research. Perhaps the greatest challenge is the inclusion of the marginalised and demands commitment from those wishing to include the 'hard to reach', but also a willingness from the alienated. This indicates a potential role for networking and translating individuals and organisations.

Clearly communities are organising from inside **and** outside, collectively taking forward issues of concern both formally **and** informally. This collective approach to social change and justice shows a community-centred path that acknowledges a significant role for community development work and bridging organisations. This has been verified where the function of frontline enabling organisations has been emphasised as central to community empowerment, bringing about transformation when working **with** communities. The way people become politically involved and

effect change, as well as what structures support this process have been examined, highlighting the problems **and** possibilities.

The shift in government policy exists alongside new ways of working in the community sector, which, when combined, have the potential to achieve social transformation in the view of a number of participants. It is where these two elements come together that the potential for community empowerment can take place. There is evidence from participants that effective change can be achieved by communities joining with others in partnership to engage on broad-based issues, rather than single-issue campaigns that work in isolation. By uniting over common concerns they stand a better chance of establishing lasting change as infrastructural support is developed, channelling diverse opinions into the policy process. This approach is described by Sean in relation to the work of Acton Community Forums. Again, the need for crucial support has been stressed, which includes capacity building, networking, fundraising and empowering opportunities provided in an accessible and enabling manner that supports the disaffected to articulate their concerns, build confidence and offer solutions. Structural and enabling mechanisms need to be in place if equal partnerships, effective action and leadership are to be nurtured. Acknowledging the insights, skills and knowledge offered by community input represents a beginning. However addressing the inevitable tensions when diverse interests are expressed is also necessary, such as effective channels for dialogue described by Mahamad.

“There are tensions between the policy that’s come from the Government, the policies that come from funders, policies that come from the surveys, and the community needs. Because it might be a good and lovely policy coming from the Government, and then on the other hand, does it marry with the community needs? There is a conflict.” (Mahamad)

This will be explored in more depth in the next section. There are challenges that need to be faced with the inevitability of competing interests in a democratic state. These need to be addressed in the pursuit of amicable solutions to the real problems experienced in the global city.

The literature and research evidence has revealed that political engagement is happening through diverse routes, to varying levels and with different degrees of success. Some people work from inside, using traditional routes, influencing from within, at a lobbying and policy level. Others participate from outside the system, challenging existing structures and demonstrating alternative solutions. In West London, political engagement is experienced in different ways, successes are in part due to the flexibility and motivations of key actors. Crucially, what has emerged is that some work from inside **and** outside at the same time, and it is here that new opportunities for creative communication, dialogue and solutions are emerging. Once again, bridging individuals and organisations are in a unique situation that has the potential to cultivate empowerment and social transformation. Issues of access and influence can be addressed in this site where people and politics meet.



## **Balancing the tensions**

Balancing the sometimes conflicting pressures of political engagement and the challenges of community involvement are considered here. This issue is one that requires careful planning as it has the potential to make or break empowerment opportunities. Measures include managing the sometimes conflicting pressures such as between top-down and bottom-up approaches, engaging with policy without compromising mission, or coping with the constraints of the new spaces. Tensions are evident in both the theory and practice. Evidence of the 'democratic deficit' implies that citizens are not necessarily embracing political engagement, as described by resident and community activists who speak of the entrenched disempowerment of the marginalised. From another perspective, a different resident association representative suggests that some elected politicians lose touch with the electorate. This point is also taken up by the environmental activist who doubts the effectiveness of the current voting arrangements. The politician amongst my sample, however, sees the potential of working within the system, standing for election and going to the heart of the decision-making chambers to influence policy and practice. The range of different opinions here suggests that tensions exist, debate is occurring and engagement taking place. The evidence points to the different ways people are choosing to participate in the political, which are extremely varied and dynamic.

A commitment toward citizen involvement and dialogue exists under deliberative democracy in an idealised model where the exercise of collective political power is based on debate among equals. This model involves the use of public power which is crucially matched by the accountability and responsiveness of political power. Successfully balancing often conflicting forces is an enormous challenge however. Of all of the people interviewed the person who is best situated to manage this is Ahmed who unites his personal and political experiences. As a politician that believes in the democratic principle, he has turned his extreme experiences in a refugee camp into political activism, and finally into mainstream

politics by bringing the Arab voice into the political arena, influencing the highest level debate.

Authors and activists describe the situations and processes needed to encourage and shape local participation and political engagement. There is evidence of a role for local activists and the voluntary sector as brokers of demands and concerns at a neighbourhood level, organising support and influencing change. Taylor (2003: p.195) stresses the tension of balancing inward and outward perspectives, participation and leadership roles, and cohesion with diversity. Sean also describes the balancing and skill required to achieve this within his organisation.

“We’ve had to play with the tensions which arose between the requirements of the funders and the visions of the founders.” (Sean)

This vital position is clearly demonstrated by each of the representatives of the networking organisations, who balance the evident strains between local and government priorities. Skill, experience and awareness of the issues are needed to effectively manage these pressures.

The question of bringing about change by working from ‘outside’ and / or ‘inside’ is an issue raised by many of the participants as they work creatively to effect change as discussed earlier. Competing tensions, changing dynamics and evolving context has meant that the rules of engagement are constantly shifting. Questioning the political process, the ability to make a difference and the effect of positionality are issues that are grappled with by professionals and activists. Taylor argues that power elites and patronage limit the inclusion of ‘outsiders’ and their ability to access information and power. However, having looked into the experiences of those working inside, outside and across the sectors, as well as the strategies utilised to involve and empower people, it is clear that a complex web of relationships, tactics and approaches exist that in fact cross-cut the sectors. The division between insider and outsider becomes blurred, with agents of transformation working at all levels. Representatives from across my sample, from ‘outside’ community groups, from council officers ‘within’, as well as those bridging organisations ‘between’, it is clear that as agents of transformation they have used

formal and informal, institutional and innovative routes to include marginalised voices and address tensions. Bari illustrates the challenges this generates, whilst working with determination to ensure continued support for the most vulnerable.

“I’ve found that once you work in ‘social inclusion’ or ‘social exclusion’ depending on your point of reference, you become excluded as a professional or as a group of professionals. We’ve had a vast array of problems with mainstream agencies, who want to manipulate what we charge or how we work et cetera. So I would say that we are a community organisation...trying to be effective and I would hope that we represent a wide variety of people who have been excluded.” (Bari)

The need to maintain organisational aspiration and stability whilst overcoming professional barriers are identified as necessary to sustain the support to marginalised young people.

The political system offers opportunities to influence policy decisions; however insider and outsider interest groups may require different strategies. Insider groups work within traditional power structures at the policy process level. This perspective is advocated by Ahmed working within the Labour Party, and Dillan at a council strategy level, for example. Outsider groups put their concerns on the policy agenda by seeking alternative pathways. Resident action groups and environmental activists both describe this approach in their campaign strategies. Public opinion is clearly an important factor in pressure groups’ ability to gain support, used unsurprisingly by the journalist in my sample. Grant’s (1995) conclusion that outsider organisations are unable to take decisions and wield power is however refuted by the clear achievements of these organisations in negotiating power and winning campaign battles despite the structural constraints involved. Furthermore, the breakdown of the insider : outsider dichotomy has been shown with ‘outsiders’ having ‘insider’ contacts, ‘insiders’ emerging from ‘outsider’ roots, and a general willingness to work collectively toward inclusive and effective relationships. Sally consciously brings her personal experience, ongoing links with marginalised young people and professional skill into youth service provision and strives to keep it relevant.

“I just think it’s a very dangerous thing for people to make decisions about how the service is going to be shaped, to be out of touch. So I work quite hard at keeping in touch, having conversations and asking how things are.”

(Sally)

This is a central finding of this research, as numerous examples demonstrate the cross-cutting dynamics within and between the sectors. Exploring the personal journeys of activists and officers has revealed motivations and experiences that have diverse origins, but that encompass common ground and aspirations.

The power of the community sector to translate political constraints and opportunities into action, developing strong leverage against powerful opponents is evident in the West London environment. This is particularly identifiable amongst the second-tier organisations that have the incentive to build effective structures around communities, organisations and networks. Informal dialogue between social movements and the state is characteristic of a new approach to politics. This is described by representatives of the networking organisations who are instrumental in developing innovative ways of working and cutting through traditional behaviours. This study illustrates the ways bridging organisations can balance opinion and translate between partners, broker compromise and negotiate agreement between community / social movement and statutory perspectives: a key skill that supports community empowerment. Earl describes this characteristic of the voluntary sector.

“I really do feel that E.C.V.S. does represent the community. I have to give credit to Alex; he will stand up to the local authority. That was proven to me in the challenges he gave the local authority when they were cutting the voluntary sector funding last year, and he stood up boldly and bravely and defended the community groups, to the point where the Leader backed off and decided to re-negotiate. And to me that is very strong leadership. It is the ability to negotiate. Whether its community groups or the local authority, it’s always individuals’ ability to negotiate.” (Earl)

This location also potentially has the trust, capacity, resources and infrastructure needed to build the case for community empowerment.

Marginalised communities that challenge inequality by having voice and choice are empowered through connections of influence. This is apparent in participants' views on how effective partnerships can support empowerment opportunities in today's complex society. Networking with enabling organisations helps communities to develop their confidence and plays an important function in managing tensions. Support in maintaining networks is available from bridging organisations with an understanding of the community **and** the state enabling participants to have influence over decisions affecting them. The Community Forum plays a role in breaking down these barriers.

“Where we fit in is in trying to articulate on behalf of South Acton residents, young people, asylum seekers, refugees. The working together is really important in such a diverse area, to work together and try and understand each other a bit. It's very necessary.” (Sean)

This finding supports my conclusion that bridging organisations and individuals are seen to have a role to play in managing conflict and facilitating community empowerment.

Officers and activists are keen to explain that for a community to have control it requires the confidence and capability to assert itself, but also the need for the state to be accessible and accountable. For Friedmann (1992: p.81) this is made possible through an inclusive democracy that contains all potential interests in public decision-making. The effectiveness of such structures is a concern as political engagement that addresses systemic contradictions and failings is needed if imbalances in society are to be redressed. There is a need to build empowering relationships, adapt to change and for communities to equip themselves with the knowledge-base and skills to challenge inequality and share power. An interesting outcome from this research is the way the different urban actors have adapted their perspectives and practices over time with changing policy agendas, political situation and experience.

Questioning Friedmann's idealised model, the urban actors identify the very real barriers to inclusive democracy. They do nonetheless also demonstrate practical routes toward the creation of political spaces where greater involvement in decision-making is possible. The importance of creating accessible opportunities for involvement is evident, but equally important is the need to acknowledge and address historical inequalities and ensure that diverse voices are not only heard, but acted upon, and that ongoing involvement in decision-making is supported. Mahamad explains the barriers experienced by the refugees his organisation supports; however he is also keen to point out how his organisation exploits empowerment opportunities.

“Although we've been around and the issues and problems have been around for a long time. ... Because for the community itself, there is always the myth going on, there is misunderstanding, there is suspicion. ... That itself is a problem. It's seen as a threat. ... But still, the opportunities are there, and the understanding and it's a working relationship, and as an organisation we do intend to get involved in whatever's happening in the area.” (Mahamad)

The less than perfect reality of marginalisation, political alienation and social inequality characterises contemporary political reality and is described in this study. This reality connects with Flacks' (1995: p.252) analysis of the demise of Western democracy. Flacks does however identify a role for community activists to lobby for national legislation which actively supports neighbourhood empowerment, the devolution of power and the inclusion of local people in decisions that affect them. He also speaks of the need to provide resources to support community ownership, development and control of local sustainable economies: a point raised by all of the community organisations struggling for financial stability whilst providing crucial functions. Having explored the problems of political alienation, the potential of the devolution of power as a possible solution in the West London environment has been raised by those wielding power as well as those with none.

The connection between the global and the local has underpinned this research. Ledwith (1997: p.148) has explained the effects of the exploitation of the poor by the privileged and powerful in the name of democracy, describing poverty as a political construct. In order to overcome poverty and achieve equality, she argues for radical social transformation by understanding the nature of injustice and the development of workable alternatives. Ledwith's conclusion that 'true democracy' thinks globally and acts locally is something alluded to by many of the participants. The appropriateness of these notions to the experiences of actors in the global city has been explored, together with the fact that so many of the people themselves represent the global in the local. This has a clear bearing on these findings. The experience of London as a global city has been born out through the actors, their origins and their perspectives. Understanding the importance of the global context is commonly described with references to international economic and political factors affecting local realities, and an appreciation of different political systems and influences. This point is demonstrated by Ahmed's references to the impact of the Arab experience outside and within the U.K..

"But now after living here for so many years we start to realise we have a part to play. In a democracy everybody should be involved and everybody have a say. By being involved you can have a say, and you would be listened to. You can make a difference if you are involved." (Ahmed)

Clearly, there is a great deal to learn from the complex inter-relationships that exist within contemporary globalised London communities.

The extent to which estate residents in government renewal areas are weary of top-down initiatives has also clearly emerged. Estate-based community organisations, as well as community workers have endured negative historical experiences that confirm socio-economic divisions and inequalities. The difficulties of overcoming this legacy and the need to redress the resulting imbalances have been identified as critical elements of the empowerment journey. Karina explains the way she tackles this by relating her own experience of empowerment to the young people in a way that is meaningful to them.

“I teach my students they are responsible for their own actions and have to take control of things that are around them. As I say, run things in a way that is appropriate because it's very difficult for them to understand that they have a certain amount of power...if you break it down and bring it into their way.” (Karina)

An approach that acknowledges the realities of power relations is essential if interventions are going to be owned by the people affected. Working in ways that accept that discrimination exists is an honest starting point from which equal opportunity can be advanced.

Historical and spatial factors, as well as the relationships between the different actors impact on participation experiences. The need to explore all of these aspects of empowerment is highlighted by representatives as they try to fully appreciate the complexity of these forces, as well as the ways of working towards transformation. Confronting past inequalities and facing current challenges is a necessary facet of empowerment. Empowerment rhetoric can subordinate those involved and unless preconceptions and existing relationships are addressed constructively, the experience can simply reinforce divisions. Such processes are described by council officers who have extensive experience of the community sector, and indeed some emerging from estates themselves. Community activists and bridging organisations distinguish between experiencing bottom-up activism and receiving top-down policy interventions. This concept of ownership has been portrayed by authors, activists and professionals as central to positive community-led experiences. Sally refers to the physical and psychological space needed for young people to find their voice.

“...this is their space, and they need to feel that they have ownership, and it's safe for them to do and to explore things that maybe they would choose not to explore at home. And it's not about hiding it, but actually it's about creating space that enables that to happen.” (Sally)

Community participation has, however, also been linked to economic considerations and described as a tool of **depoliticisation** and **disempowerment**



rather than democratisation and empowerment. The feeling that meaningful decision-making and real power exists in another place and space is something that community activists identify as reflecting the experiences of the marginalised, disempowered members of society that they work with. The South Acton Estate-based projects and resident representatives describe the feelings of those whose participation in resident consultations have often led to a feeling of powerlessness as their input has been consistently ignored. Furthermore, community sector representatives explain that without material resources and structural support, community-based organisations are disabled from progressing. These people express the need to understand and address the broader economic and social dynamics if their popular socio-political movements are to attain significant transformation for marginalised communities. Balancing these conflicts by the effective acquisition and assertion of power through dialogue and the demonstration of alternatives is described as vital to meaningful participation in the political process. Generating positive ways of understanding and working together is an outcome to strive for, where communities and public agencies utilise empowering processes. As a way forward, the following section looks at the opportunities offered by changes in empowerment policy and practice.

## Governance

The impact of government engagement initiatives on practice, particularly through neighbourhood devolution will be examined here. The effect of the state on civil society can be seen through approaches to governance, with implications for civil, political and social engagement. The consequences of the policy context are evident in grassroots experiences as people identify new spaces for citizen engagement and the barriers to taking these up effectively. For instance, the Youth Matters Green Paper referenced earlier, encourages young people to become active citizens, emphasising their rights and responsibilities. However, Sally questions how in touch with young people's reality the Green Paper actually is and how much of a difference it will make to their lives. It is suggested here that with greater input from diverse young people the results would be more meaningful, appropriate and relevant. Sally identifies policy shortfalls and the way those working with young people need to convert sterile policy into meaningful practice.

"It doesn't meet the needs of the young people and also doesn't hit its targets. So it just shoots in the middle. It is about trying to marry those things, because I'm not naïve enough to think that we don't have to do some of this stuff to get the money. We do. But it's about trying to make it real, and trying to translate policies, legislation, guidelines, whatever is the stuff that's coming down, and shape it into practice." (Sally)

This research demonstrates that even the most excluded communities exhibit social capital and actively participate in issues of concern to them. In particular the residents' action groups demonstrate empowering practices via a wide range of routes including building alliances, utilising creative communication approaches, undertaking research and generating evidence to support their causes. S.A.R.A.G. exhibits a conscious and critical approach to informed action.

"...at the moment the focus is on people in South Acton exercising the right to manage this place. That's our central focus. Around that are all the initiatives that we have taken over the last three years." (Khenan)

The evidence exposed in this body of work clearly demonstrates that far from being ineffective pawns, disadvantaged communities are actively interested in organising. The policy implication here is the need to work **with** communities in order to understand and address the complexities behind poverty and exclusion.

Shifts in policy and practice are evident and increasing opportunities for communities to have a voice in decision-making, as partners in policy-making and playing a greater role in local governance. Concerns about the equality of these partnerships and how representative community voices are heard have been raised by both officers and activists in these findings. Political opportunities to initiate social change from below do exist, with examples cited including political representation in Parliament. Having experienced life on both sides, powerless and powerful, Ahmed outlines the features of working outside and inside mainstream politics. He describes the difficulties experienced by lobbying organisations he has been involved with, driving him to become politically active and go straight to the heart of power in Parliament.

“I have been a delegate to the Labour Party conference once. In the last five years I have been to every Labour Party conference. At the conference you could meet all the players, from the Prime Minister, all the ministers, all the M.P.’s. You are living with them for a week in a hotel and you could see them all the time, take your message directly to them. Besides, also, you could put your point through the conference itself, as a delegate. You could speak at the conference or take a resolution at the conference. All this made me feel that working as a pressure group is all right, but really it’s more important to be in the mainstream political parties because that’s where the decisions are made. Pressure groups put your point of view, but when you are part of the mainstream you are closer to the decision-makers than the people outside.” (Ahmed)

This research has generated evidence from inside and outside the system and from a range of different sectors where partnerships and participation are creating new political spaces and public arenas where exclusion can be addressed and

alternative solutions voiced.

If change is to be sustained it must be embedded, a concern explicitly described by many of the participants. Concern is expressed that the creative approaches and freedoms exhibited when working outside the system may be lost when subsumed by the local authority. The Sure Start officer expresses fears about the organisations transformation from independent and parent-led, to its new location within the council children's services. The worry here is that with increasingly bureaucratic mechanisms, the newly empowered parents operating within the existing localised structures may become alienated. Mainstreaming services has the potential to strengthen and secure the service. However, the careful management of this is crucial if the strengths and local character are not to be lost. Bari expresses his concern regarding the relativity of power and the need to 'think outside the box' afforded through a more critical approach.

"It's a strange thing to do, to give a bunch of people who very rarely wonder out of their institution that much responsibility in my opinion. So I think they've changed the system and changed people's responsibilities, without really allowing them to have the experience of what it's like to be outside."

(Bari)

Here the need to be in touch with the issues and experiences of life on the margins of society is central to an egalitarian education for life. Bari cautions that power without this responsibility further entrenches social division.

There are others who identify problems encountered when change is linked to an individual, and that when they move on their driving influence is lost. Whilst the actions of individuals can empower, their loss is felt strongly. However, by formalising the input of a multitude of voices through the work of networking organisations and forums, diversity of view need not be lost. For these transformative changes to be managed successfully, the capacity of both community representatives and professionals need to be built, addressing current barriers and pre-empting future challenges. Legislation that supports this empowerment process has been identified as impacting on the experiences of

those that are marginal and historically excluded, but also requires receptiveness and responsibility from those with the power to bring about change. Mahamad expresses the important role of advocates and organisations for the voiceless and powerless.

“Because the community...are asylum seekers, 50% have decisions on their asylum, 50% don't. So those who don't, they don't have a voice. ... But having individuals from the same background who can make the difference, who can have the voice, or even getting forums who can advocate those issues can make the difference.” (Mahamad)

The significance of the impact of public policy on community empowerment has key consequences for this research, set as this is within the framework of the changing context of local governance. I have taken forward the analysis of how new forms of governance, civil regeneration and community change open up public arenas and political dialogue. The possibilities of reaching alternative solutions to ongoing struggle are portrayed through the realisation of opportunity and empowerment. The illustrations of practices that encourage active involvement are described by officers working to include the input of residents, whether on Resident or Safer Neighbourhood Panels where local priorities are identified; through council structures such as the Planning and the Community Group that look at the impact of developments on neighbourhoods; or through networks and forums such as A.C.F. and E.C.V.S. where community input is fed into strategic borough plans. The policy directives that support civil involvement, the officers' approaches to participation and activists' empowerment strategies all have the potential to generate meaningful change. The danger is that those that are unwilling or unable to move with the times are in danger of atrophying. The challenge is that rather than resisting change, the shifting context needs to be embraced creatively – without loss of mission or values. This challenge has evidently been met by many, supporting my view that the ability to adapt to the changing political and policy context is fundamental to the development of community power. The following quote demonstrates the way the community responded to the national and local

drive toward devolution, initially with caution, but rising to the challenge and currently managing the centre.

“with changes in the management of the estate from being managed by Ealing Council, to the Arms Length Management Organisation... The whole combination of that and Central Governments issue of self-management and so on. It was decided that there would be a separate organisation called Acton Vale Community Association, primarily and initially to look at the feasibility of taking over the running of the Community Centre. And also looking at how to utilise the community space a lot more effectively, and see if it could make it worthwhile for the community association to run it. Initially it was very sceptical about the whole thing, but then began to warm to the whole thing. ... they would have the benefit of control and the monetary, financial reward for running the community centre, and hopefully become self-financing.” (Jai)

From the literature on decision-making processes, policy implications and the civic arena, as well as from the ways that people actually experience politics, it is clear that these experiences influence engagement with politics. Similarly, the more people feel empowered and part of decision-making processes locally, nationally and globally, the more inclined they are to actively participate in the socio-political arena. There is verification of exponential growth in participation in areas where community activity is supported, evident in their development in areas where there are established voluntary sector support mechanisms and where second-tier organisations operate.

The move from government to governance is crucial to understanding the impact of recent policy shifts on communities. Responding to growing political disengagement, entrenched inequalities and marginalisation, government policy has been redirected to tackle these problems and community empowerment is now identified as a core business for local authorities. A move toward an empowering role for government is identified and a culture shift promoted. This research identifies changing policies and demonstrates the ways the community sector is

rising to the challenge offered up by local governance. Examples include situating community representatives on the Local Strategic Partnership, the evidence of partnership working focused on youth provision, or the opportunity for the community to manage resources, whether community centres or entire estates. Naomi explains the way she and her organisation straddle the community and statutory sectors, influencing policy and procedure.

“So we have to play a part within the community, not just at a community level but at a strategic level, that plays a part and feeds into our policy development.” (Naomi)

Highly relevant to this research is Taylor’s analyses of the moves toward governance, participation and partnership policies and their potential to generate new public and political spaces. A further pertinent point is the shift that this indicates from a “fixed idea of power being rooted in the institution of the state to a more fluid idea of power shared, developed and negotiated between partners.” (2003: p.121). Evidence of the potential of these spaces and power as flowing has been demonstrated through participants’ experiences, and signifies a key empowerment opportunity.

Questions of equality of access and status in relation to policy and power are also examined in the literature and through the case studies. Policy making has been associated historically with gatekeepers, inaccessibility and inequality. Governance and partnership working have opened up new possibilities to influence decision-making. These changes have also been identified by the majority of my research sample describing spaces to share, develop and negotiate power, formally, informally and increasingly through the mechanisms being developed by networking organisations. Community sector partners generally believe that despite the limitations identified they are nevertheless progressively impacting on process and practice through civic participation, community engagement and partnership models. Power relationships and engagement strategies are changing and evidently impacting on both policy and practice in West London according to many of those interviewed.

The National Empowerment Partnership research into community empowerment has identified a “demonstrable and positive impact on individuals, community groups, communities and public agencies.” (Thomas Neumark and Irene Evison, 2009: p.1). This report acknowledges the barriers, debates and benefits of empowerment, which translates into practice at both community and agency levels. Based on the appreciation that active citizens, strong communities and partnership can better meet public needs, it describes incentives and stipulates obligations to support community empowerment. Significantly this enabling work is at national and regional levels, adapts to changing Government priorities, operates across the sectors and works in partnership to change cultures in order to improve participation and democracy.

Having a seat at the decision-making table is only one side of the story; influencing the agenda and actions is the other side. This point is raised amongst members of the community sector that are wary of tokenistic representation. Others are concerned that the playing-field needs to be level if community members are not going to feel alienated through the choice of language, environment or behaviour. The Sure Start officer describes the damaging effects of elitist language for example, together with the effects of holding meetings in council offices as opposed to community settings, expressing concerns that the most marginalised will remain ‘hard to reach’ and powerless unless these ideological and practical issues are addressed. Organisations require support structures, involvement opportunities, skills development and capacity building if existing inequalities are to be overcome. Certainly there is evidence of growing opportunities for community voices to be heard and as policy changes affect grassroots behaviour, new ways of making decisions are evolving in tandem.

The potential of the politics of transformation is described by community activists who explore alternative approaches, mobilise action and develop strategies related to social change. They see community organisations as the site where people learn their first steps towards conscious collective action. Citizen participation



evidently can help shape a common social purpose, encourage dialogue and balance different interests. There are examples of this which range from small- to large-scale community empowerment, such as local voices impacting on national level debates and community ownership of local assets. This position is clearly illustrated by Ahmed in relation to the Arab community, but the argument is relevant to all those that are disconnected from the political process.

“If we could educate...and raise awareness on how important it is to be organised, and how important it is to join the political system. These people would understand that the only way that they can take their place into the political system or the society is by organising themselves, by joining at the local level, at the national level, the community organisations or the political parties. All these organisations are very important.” (Ahmed)

This study shows that where there is this awareness, these practices connect the individual via community, to society and global considerations. Significantly, it also highlights views about the spaces and opportunities that enable this to occur.

The role of pressure groups in society and politics meets a particular need and contributes to dynamic decision-making associated with governance. Engaging in healthy debate, addressing contentious issues and providing opportunities for alternative opinions to be heard forms the basis of a dynamic democracy. The inclusion of activists' perspectives and the opportunity to influence the generation of public policy is an outcome of empowerment that needs to be embraced as a result of the devolution of power. Concerns regarding conservative and short-sighted input from citizens who have not the confidence or vision to articulate far-reaching perspectives is raised by officers keen to include those beyond the 'usual subjects'. In this instance, Charlie describes the problems that arise if police targets are set by 'Not In My Back Yard' (N.I.M.B.Y.) agendas, rather than addressing the roots of gang culture for instance. Conversely, Mathew calls for the contributions of local people and environmental activists to counter the persuasive arguments of the developers and big business in planning decisions. Personally, Mathew is guided by his values and skills to struggle for justice, whilst

organisationally he brings localised experiences into wider decision-making arenas to bring about change.

“I’m also on the London Food Link, so therefore I represent our association at quite a lot of meetings at City Hall. And I’ve just given evidence to the Mayors London Food Strategy that’ll be out in the New Year. I’ve given evidence to that on the role of allotments in London. We’ll have a broader policy.” (Mathew)

The opportunity to debate, challenge, seek alternative solutions and have checks and balances in place is essential for a healthy democracy involving a multitude of voices in resolving problems and generating solutions.

Social movements are a reflection of the broader political structures in society and described by community professionals in terms of the evolving voluntary sector’s links with community action. Here, action emerges in response to political constraints and opportunities, translating them into collective action and mobilisation. For example, Acton Gardening Association was initially established for the health and well-being of the community, it subsequently evolved into a campaigning organisation fighting for the rights of people over profit.

There is growing potential afforded as opportunities emerge, resources are provided and alliances established that support the acquisition of power. This is taking place at a grassroots level where community groups are open to opportunities, supported to develop and articulate their position. I have examined how effectively these are bringing about involvement and change. There is evidence that campaigning organisations are capable of reaching beyond a confrontational approach, can gain power and achieve success in their area of concern. These tend to be single issue struggles however.

I am also interested in the role of enabling, networking organisations in addressing broader concerns, bringing disparate groups together and supporting the articulation of a multitude of voices. Acton Community Forum coordinates a number of networks, composed of diverse community opinions. Sean explains

how this enables popular attitudes to be challenged and targeted work more effective.

“We’re trying through bringing people together to address some of the issues affecting young people. So we’re impacting on that, and that’s a big issue where young people are being demonised. Plus other equalities issues, community cohesion issues and so on.” (Sean)

The need for communities to engage with other communities on broad-based issues is identified by Taylor (2003: p.180) as necessary to make a difference and bring about change. Bridging organisations have been highlighted through this study as playing a significant role in supporting community empowerment, particularly in relation to those that are marginalised. Taylor also identifies the need for these effective infrastructures to channel diverse voices into the policy process.

The growing move toward partnership working can be seen with the inclusion of insight from the grassroots perspective driving the process forward, particularly where high priority issues are being addressed such as the cohesion agenda. Here, the role of bridging individuals is also recognised. The Metropolitan Police now have officers dedicated to community cohesion who work in partnership, engaging at a neighbourhood level.

“I’m basically responsible for community engagement, community cohesion, networking, reassurance activities in response to serious incidents like the London bombing and so on. So I engage with key community partners, community leaders and other community groups to send out the reassurance message, keep them up to date.” (Charlie)

The questions of participation and practice are increasingly situated within the policy context where ‘community’ is now acknowledged as a powerful force to tackle social exclusion. Empowerment is seen as essential to the success of this participation agenda. Local and national government policy and practice are increasingly embracing community knowledge, resources, social capital and

alternative ideas as a way to address local problems. Significant steps are being taken toward citizen involvement, whilst articulation of the challenges that this engenders is evident. Enabling those without a voice to speak alongside measures to ensure that decision-makers hear **both** need to be acted upon, and ensuring that those with power learn to share it are all elements of addressing alienation and powerlessness. Embracing the questioning Freirian approach, Mahamad maintains a critical overview that informs his action.

“If you look into the education system in this country or the philosophy of education, you could say simply it’s all about business. ... But if you look into why do people need education: education means you need to produce the future leaders of this country. So, how many leaders do we need? And who will be the leaders? ... access.” (Mahamad)

This examination of the policy context and decision-making procedures highlight important questions about power. Institutional, cultural and personal challenges associated with empowerment and community change have been revealed. Activists and officers describe the barriers that confront empowerment and the ways they adapt to changes in policy and through their attempts to address equalities issues. It is clear that for meaningful political participation there are policy implications and there is need for institutional change. This study identifies the prerequisites for the development of empowerment and the emergence of new forms of governance in West London. Whatever the limitations though, this has been a particularly empowering period in terms of opportunity. Whether this is sustained in the long-term is another question beyond the reach of this research, although they do link back to some of the questions that emerged from the literature review chapters.

## **Chapter 14**

### **Conclusion:**

**Key findings**

**The research process**

**Further study**

## Key findings

Returning to my initial premise that contemporary urban experiences of marginalisation contributes to the disempowerment of individuals and communities. In this chapter the central research questions and the answers that have emerged from the study are reviewed. It also highlights the influential factors impacting on perceptions and experiences of empowerment. This is where the research journey comes full circle. My contribution has built on the cumulative layers of insight into power and community empowerment and offers a further layer of understanding. This thesis articulates and analyses urban realities that connect the personal and the political. The research shows where advocates can enable connection across perceived and real divisions, identifying the important role these individuals can play in challenging oppressive structures and demonstrating how they can contribute towards involving the marginalised. It could be argued that for all the empowerment efforts revealed in this study, poverty, social exclusion and inequality still persist. Alternatively, I would argue that questions remain concerning how inequitable society would have been had empowerment efforts *not* been pursued. Furthermore, the newly emerging marginalised communities provide ongoing challenges. Below, the significant findings are drawn together.

Many activists and community professionals possess a holistic view in recognition of the wider implications behind their experiences in Acton, understood as part of the global city. Without this appreciation of the dynamics of power, the implications of historical factors, the impact of economic and political forces - any comprehension of power and empowerment continue to be locked in polemic opposition of 'them and us.' The testimonies challenge simplistic models of power as inadequate by presenting a far more nuanced analysis. Findings suggest that the personal, organisational and political change that permits a shift in the mental landscape is seen as necessary for social transformation. This change needs to be capable of embracing diversity, equality and mutual respect in order to meaningfully confront the problems of the metropolis. Notions of power expressed here draw on different models and life experiences, bringing theory and practice together in ways that are meaningful and useful to community activists and professionals. People utilise

paradigms that help to frame their understanding of how power operates, recognising that this and their experience of power are dynamic.

Analysing these findings it is clear that there are no fixed models of community power. Instead, people adjust to change. This leads me to believe in the relevance of a more flexible and reflexive understanding and approach. Whilst key authors' explorations of the notion of power and empowerment underpin my thesis, I have found those that make sense of this more nuanced and complex appreciation of power most useful. The different views of power in society vary. However, all the participants have struggled within their area of influence to support community empowerment. What has emerged is the acknowledged need for a culture change for residents **and** officers, for the community **and** statutory sectors, in order to overcome historical barriers and tackle present challenges. This also verifies the importance of looking beyond simplistic polarising models.

In terms of the ways people have changed their views about power and empowerment tactics over time, there is evidence that no straight forward division between officers and activists exists. The research illustrates reflections on empowerment experiences and demonstrates the effects of perception on practice, showing the conditions and characteristics that are perceived as most effectively enabling empowerment. Usefully drawing on Gaventa's power cube model to plot activists in terms of power, space and place, I have found that the way people adapt their ways of thinking and functioning is also more sophisticated than I had initially envisaged. The complexities of reality trigger changes in awareness, and affect behaviour, described in the 'perception–practice cycle of change'. It is the interplay of context, experience, analysis and strategy within a particular time-space framework that impact on the dynamics and location of power.

Empowerment and ownership achieved through active involvement in issues and projects that make a difference to people's life experiences are exposed as evolving from critical consciousness, community activism and transformative endeavour. Overcoming negative experiences and building a positive vision of change is an outcome that has been identified across the research sample.

Ways of working that involve people seeking their own solutions and generating constructive change are described as central to community empowerment. Flexible approaches to participation and a culture shift are seen as needed for meaningful engagement and active citizenship. Commitment and building confidence and competence to tackle challenges are recognised elements of empowerment. This research also demonstrates the critical role played by people and organisations in shifting the focus onto addressing the fundamental social inequalities that lie at the root of many of the problems emanating from alienation.

The notion of empowerment as a collective concept and a political project resonates with the urban actors of West London. They demonstrate varying forms of commitment to challenging historically entrenched and socially embedded power relations. Alongside actors' commitment to involve and empower, however, there is also evidence of frustration concerning historically rooted power differences. The research suggests that a holistic strategy as well as commitment to change is needed to make progress towards social justice and equality, with recognition of Acton as part of the global city and the dynamic nature community.

The research contributes new insights into the narratives of community revealing multifaceted identities and tensions. The demographics of the local area and London as a global metropolis have proved to be influential. Participants do not examine local issues in isolation. Instead, they reflect upon experiencing the global within the local, whether dealing with alienation and marginalisation, whether coming from established or newer communities. This complex context impacts on the diverse life experiences and multiple realities of different urban actors and needs to be understood if people are to have an effective voice.

Political engagement is taking place but through diverse routes, at different scales and with varying degrees of success. What is apparent is that some participants work from inside, some from outside and some significantly from a position straddling both. Subsequently new opportunities for dialogue and resolutions are emerging, but there is evidence of pressure.



Tensions are evident in all sectors as people are faced with mounting pressures arising from the demands being made upon them and the complexity of the issues they face. For the community sector, these emergent tensions include the danger of losing touch with founding principles or of selling out to others targets. Conflicting priorities and contradictory demands generate stress for officers and require coping skills. Strong commitment to empowerment principles is seen as necessary in order to manage these pressures effectively. Tackling these materialising conflicts is seen as vital to sustaining community empowerment, within a rapidly changing policy context.

The strategic function of bridging individuals and organisations has clearly been identified as playing a vital translating role between the relatively powerless and relatively powerful. Networking community sector organisations with the capacity to understand the policy framework can facilitate communication, negotiating and supporting the community to benefit from democratic devolution and neighbourhood control. Clearly, these individuals and organisations have the potential to control and manipulate, acting as gate-keepers to opportunity. Conversely however, there is scope to redistribute and devolve power to communities through this type of support that acknowledges local conditions, history and potential.

The important role of people with grassroots experience situated in positions of influence can provide unique insight and sensitivity to local issues and empowerment opportunities. The challenge here is how to utilise and develop these key individuals' capacities to act as conduits for change. This is perhaps the most significant finding emerging from this study, in part due to the wealth of cross-sectoral and global experience of the actors informing this research. The ability to be an 'outsider' and an 'insider' at the same time can generate both empathy and understanding which can generate appropriate and effective practice. Whilst acknowledging that some 'pull up the ladder behind them', this has not emerged as a significant pattern in this study. The characteristic of bringing life experiences into the practical application of empowerment goes deep into the personal and political values of those actors that link the margins and the mainstream. The balancing of interests during democratic renewal

requires intelligent mechanisms of involvement that facilitate the inclusion of diverse voices. Frontline professionals with direct experience of changing communities and the evolution of community identity, membership and meaning are, I suggest, pivotal to the success of this process. However, this is also a challenging and complex position to be in, and one needing support, flexibility and commitment.

This research shows that those activists with personal and professional experience of urban diversity may be best placed to understand how to address these communities' needs. A significant number of participants indeed fell into this category, with many community and statutory sector workers emerging from situations of hardship and / or need themselves, providing the core motivational drive to sustain long-term commitment to promoting empowerment. A prominent feature of effective activists is that they are identified as having both knowledge **and** experience of different worlds (whether economic, social, racial, faith, political or cultural) enabling them to bring new insight to old problems.

These findings point towards the issues and opportunities impacting on conceptions and strategies for community empowerment, then. The research has revealed that yes, there are increasing opportunities for empowerment, but there are constraints and tensions that need to be acknowledged and addressed. The findings also support my conclusion that deeply held values motivate and affect life choices and conceptions of power across the research sample and sectors. Experiencing power differentials, understanding the enactment of inequality and the challenges of disengagement directly impact on each of the actors to some degree. Evidence of dynamic and flexible approaches to this has emerged, alongside the maintenance of core values and belief in equalities principles.

The research has identified the case for nurturing the capacity to adapt to the changing political and policy context recognising that bridging individuals and organisations may be well positioned to support community empowerment and social transformation. How this will be played out in the future remains to be seen. But questions concerning how self-sustaining these trends are have been raised through this study. With the likelihood of more policies with a

greater emphasis on location and continuing devolution, the need for more sophisticated ways to deal with this ongoing change and the emerging challenges remain. Perhaps the role of intermediaries will become even more important with these further shifts.

The personal testimonies exposed here have challenged some of my initial preconceptions, including presumptions about the values and motivations of those involved in the statutory and community sectors. I set out expecting to identify evidence of horizontal and vertical differences apparent between the sectors; whereas any distinctions that have emerged lie in the different sectors' areas of focus and specialism. I am struck by the fact that the majority of the sample experiences the saturation of their values into their personal and political choices, providing guiding principles and motivation.

It is also important, of course, to acknowledge the fact that the selection of the research sample, by the very fact of their presence and sustained involvement is inevitably biased toward those that have persisted, rather than those that are no longer active or accessible. That said, the commitment to make a positive contribution and the determination to support greater community involvement cuts across the sample and sectors.

We live in an increasingly complex and contradictory world, where unequal political, economic and social conditions engender struggle and nurture discontent. The research participants acknowledge the need to address these problems emerging from the coexistence of poverty and wealth, disadvantage and advantage, powerlessness and power. However, the research supports my view that people also share common concerns. Although finding the right balance between competing values is difficult, common ground that embraces difference and seeks solutions to shared problems nonetheless exist. Having identified this research evidence, its significance lies with its potential to be built on in practice. While more needs to be done to address the complex problems associated with empowerment initiatives, the advantages of grassroots experience informing appropriate approaches offer potentially promising ways forward for future endeavours.

## **The research process**

The place I began to undertake this research, nearly five years ago, is a very different place from where I find myself now. Not the physical place so much as the academic and analytical perspective has been transformed along the way leading to a greater appreciation of the complexity of the factors involved. Furthermore, the political landscape and context has also changed from my beginnings in the midst of the New Labour era, to concluding on the eve of a national election taking stock of the achievements and remaining challenges of this socio-political period. This changing environment has implications for both the opportunities and experiences of empowerment. This too has impacted on the research.

In this closing section I consider the learning experience involved in undertaking a piece of research such as this. Reflecting on the early stages, the literature review opened up new worlds, possibilities and ways of evaluating these. Here, each avenue took me into new territories, expanding and then needing to focus in upon my area of enquiry. This need to clarify and refine my focus has been an ongoing process, informed by both the literature and my initial explorations of the research question through the fieldwork. The ability to critically analyse the research data has proved to be the greatest challenge, particularly in situating myself in relation to insider/outsider issues. The need to distinguish between my academic responsibility and my position as a community organiser has continued to test my abilities to balance my scholarly and professional roles reflexively.

Undertaking this research has been a personal challenge and I have grappled with my own limitations. I have confronted my role of promoting empowerment and giving voice to others in my personal and professional life. To find my own voice has been a huge challenge involving a steep learning curve. Recognising and facing this has helped me reflect on and analyse my own practice and given me the confidence to assert myself.

Immersion in the research methods that would most suit my area of interest was a different kind of exploration. I selected approaches and techniques that

reflected the multifaceted area of exploration and interest being investigated, enabling the participation of contributors in the process. In particular, I also found filming the interviews and focus groups useful, allowing me to revisit, remember and review the subtleties of the forms of communication as well as the content communicated. This practice also helped to ensure that the voices of my subjects remained authentic and central throughout the research process. This was not without its challenges however, both practical and ethical.

From the early considerations of participant selection to represent different sectors, to the first qualitative interviews, through to the final focus groups that fed back emerging findings for reflection and discussion: the experience has been remarkable. Questions remain regarding 'those that got away,' and I continue to wonder how different voices might have influenced my findings. There are people that I would have liked to interview, whose contributions would have enriched the research, perhaps adding different perspectives. This raises the final set of questions, about what I might have done differently with the benefit of hindsight and what else might usefully be investigated, building upon my learning from this research process, so far.

## **Further study**

This research contributes to furthering debates on the opportunities and challenges of community empowerment within the changing local and national context. I have only touched on the effects of globalisation and recognise that further study into the impact of the international arena on local experiences could provide useful insights into the complexities of citizens' experiences in a global city – global citizens in the making? It would have been relevant to explore how globalisation has been impacting on the local in more depth - particularly in relation to issues of identity, assimilation, migration and asylum. Appreciation of these dynamics could potentially enhance the understanding of the possibilities and challenges involved in strategies to promote community engagement and empowerment.

As already mentioned, the research could also have been enhanced through the study of those activists and professionals that are no longer involved in promoting community empowerment. My research focused on those who have sustained, adapted and endured. Clearly though, knowledge of and access to, those who have moved on, changed course or abandoned their activist path raises important issues for investigation.

Additionally it would also be illuminating to investigate the experiences and perspectives of those who remain way beyond the reach of contemporary community engagement, empowerment policies and programmes. Examples of such socially excluded groups include the urban 'underclasses' living on the periphery of society, youth gang cultures where crime and violence dominate, and racial/cultural groups that are particularly victimised and alienated. Although this research has identified that there are significant implications of this experience in the form of alienation, marginalisation and disenfranchisement, there was not the space to examine these conditions in depth.

My final reflections - represent not so much a conclusion, rather the identification of further questions for research – once again illustrating the cycle of action and reflection.

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## Appendix I

### Research Questions

The interview questions are set out below. The topics, range, style and number were carefully selected in order to cover the areas of interest, explore the range of themes under investigation, and enable exploration and illustration, whilst remaining relevant to the range of actors involved. The question paper explored:

**Research Area:**

Power and Influence: urban players, decision-making and community involvement.

**Interview questions:**

- Introduction: Outline of Thesis subject, approach and lines of enquiry to set the context.

**Section 1 – Urban Players:**

- Can you tell me about the organisation you are a part of?
- Who does your organisation represent?
- What kind of impact does your organisation have locally?
- Who do you consider the main stakeholders are beyond your organisation?

**Section 2 - Community Involvement:**

- How does your organisation involve local people?
- Do you feel your organisation has the support of the community it serves?
- Who is your organisation accountable to?
- How is your organisation accountable to the community?

**Section 3 – Decision-making:**

- How are decisions made in your organisation?
- How do the workers in your organisation influence decisions?
- Does the wider community take part in the decision-making process?
- Who takes final decisions?
- How does your organisation impact on wider issues?

**Section 4 - Power:**

- Does ultimate power lie within or outside your organisation?
- Who has the power to shape the debate?
- Is power at the heart of influencing decisions?
- What structures impact on access to power?
- Have your views on power shifted through time?

**Illustration:**

- Can you give an example of a case where a conflict of interests existed / power struggle was played out, and what the outcome was?

## **Appendix II**

### **Acronyms**

A.C.E.	Africa Caribbean Excellence
A.C.F.	Acton Community Forum
A.G.A.	Acton Gardening Association
A.L.M.O.	Arms Length Management Organisation
A.V.C.A.	Acton Vale Community Association
A.V.T.R.A.	Acton Vale Tenants and Residents Association
B.A.A.	British Airport Authority
B.B.C.	British Broadcasting Corporation
B.M.E.R.	Black, Minority, Ethnic, Refugee
C.U.C.R.	Centre for Urban and Community Research
D.E.T.R.	Department of Employment, Training and Rehabilitation
D.F.E.S.	Department for Education and Skills
E.C.V.S.	Ealing Community and Voluntary Service
E.R.E.C.	Ealing Race Equality Council
G7	Group of seven
I.M.F.	International Monetary Fund
J.R.F.	Joseph Rowntree Foundation
L.B.E.	London Borough of Ealing
L.E.A.	Local Education Authority
L.S.P.	Local Strategic Partnership
M.A.	Masters
M.P.A.	Metropolitan Police Authority
N.I.F.	Neighbourhood Improvement Fund
N.I.M.B.Y.	Not In My Back Yard
N.R.F.	Neighbourhood Renewal Fund
N.S.M.	New Social Movements
O.D.P.M.	Office of the Deputy Prime Minister
P.C.	Police Constable
P.F.I.	Private Finance Initiative
P.P.P.	Pupil Parent Partnership
P.R.	Public Relations
R.E.C.	Race Equality Council
R.S.L.	Registered Social Landlord
S.A.R.A.G.	South Acton Residents Action Group
S.M.T.	Senior Management Team
S.R.B.	Single Regeneration Budget
T.M.O.	Tenant Management Organisation
T.V.U.	Thames Valley University
U.K.	United Kingdom
W.T.O.	World Trade Organisation